

AUREALIS

THE AUSTRALIAN MAGAZINE OF
FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION

ISSUE ONE

NEW STORIES BY
George Turner
Terry Dowling
Jai S. Russell
& others



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FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION

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EDITORIAL

Aurealis' ancestry dates back to the 1950s, a decade which witnessed a plethora of Australian science fiction magazines: *Thrills Incorporated*, *Fantasy Science Fiction* and *Popular Science Fiction*. Since then, the principle of natural selection has applied, and the magazines, although fewer, have been of a higher quality. *Far Out* and *Aphelion* are *Aurealis'* closest relatives, and their demise left a void in Australian literature. *Aurealis* has filled that void.

If ever there were any doubts about the quality of Australian fantasy and science fiction, our first issue will dispel them. The stories in this issue are world class. Terry Dowling bedazzles us with a breadth of imaginative vision that few can match, while George Turner once again grapples with the hard questions the others avoid. Geoffrey Makey has left his rather distinctive mark on his quirky tale, and Sue Iles presents us with a story filled with her own unique brand of humour. Michael Pryor and David Tunney are two new talents who have burst onto the scene with impressive offerings. In S. Russell has weighed in with a bizarre and disturbing tale, while Duane M. Speter's gentle story has some heart-rendering consequences.

The name *Aurealis* is a hybrid of *Aurora Australis*. We hope that the magazine will be as brilliant and inspiring as the Southern Lights after which it was named. Australian literature has never had a Golden Age of fantasy and science fiction. Perhaps it is shining just up ahead.

Dick Strasser
Stephen Higgins

TALENT

By Michael Pryor

A Mercenary Talent is a slightly unnecessary thing at the best of times, an out of work one is a pathetic individual indeed.

I knew I'd find him at the Spaceport. Where else would he be? A Spaceport held comfort for him, a promise of solace. It held memories of prosperity and the hopes of more to come. It offered diversion and distraction in all the cluttered trappings ports have had since the Phoenicians.

This port was light, so light it lifted the spirits. Not just the landing field and its buildings shone, but the streets and arcades, shops and taverns, warehouses and deathtraps, all recklessly threw light to the sky, hoping to share in the promise of freedom that spaceflight held. Light was the signature of the town. It had bathed the dock which fled into the few crevices and drains, hoping for an unwary passerby.

I had but tried three bars when I came across him. *Paddy's Irish Pub* was better than it sounded, the present owner taking exception to the plastic leprechauns and green synthiflek wallpaper that the founder had felt added charm to the place. He had left the booths however, and leather they were, real leather redolent with warmth and age. I slipped into one, and watched my man at the bar while I worked through a half-litre of Guinness.

He was reduced to this, winning enough drinks from bar room acquaintances to keep away from himself. He looked a run too, like Barrymore near the end, he had a sort of desolate nobility about him, a transparent tragedy.

"Go on," he was saying to the two stooges. "I can do it. Try me." It would have been an arrogant challenge if the voice had not been so slightly slurred.

They were intrigued, in their beefy way. They knew a real Talent wouldn't be cadging drinks in a bar like this. They knew a real Talent would be at the Daikyo-Hyatt on the other side of town, treated to the best room service could offer.

The becker of the two pushed up his red baseball cap and scratched his head while his eyes searched the bar. The bowl of stale peanuts near his elbow seemed appropriate. "This'll do, pal. Have a go at this."

My man barely looked at it. "Seventy-eight," he seared, in exactly the best way to arouse hostility in chance drinking companions.

Red Cap tipped the bowl onto the bar, counting the nuts with a dirty forefinger, aided by his friend and the Estimator. With two left he nodded and then signalled to the barman. "Not bad, pal. What ya do next?"

He struggled, a lifetime of experience in avoiding responsibility having perfected the gesture into a fluid, graceful instant. "Look, I can tell you it'd take sixty-two ice-cubes to fill one of those jugs, or forty-three pretzels to stretch from one end of the bar to the next, or how many cocktail glasses you could stack before they'd crush . . . but let's try something harder . . . something more lucrative. How about a ten on it?"

Red Cap's friend sneered. They'd think nothing of losing two hundred in five minutes at the cock fights.

"Okay. What'll it be?"

"Well my friends, I can still do second and third level estimations, as well as the trivia I've shown you. My proposal is this, when you finish the fifty-three milliliters of beer you have left, breath on me. I'll tell you your blood alcohol concentration, plus or minus 0.001%. You can test on the machine." He jerked a thumb at the standard breath tester by the exit, an old model bearing the scars of those dissatisfied with its readings, but still stamped with the latest Government Standards Authority Test Seal.

Red Cap and Company grinned sceptically, appreciating the appropriateness of the test. Red Cap downed his beer and leaned over, breathing normally in the face of his challenger, who winced and then closed his eyes, wetting his lips with the point of his tongue. He tipped forward on his stool, his whole body tensing for a few small seconds, then he relaxed and opened his eyes confidently, hiding the diffidence of his body. "0.076% my man. And given that you're 96 kilos, I think you're about 21 kilos overweight for your height," he added maliciously.

Red Cap pondered this, slowly wondering whether to pour him now or later. He appeared to reserve the right and lumbered over to the machine. He rolled back like a fighter on a grass-sled, majestic and unstoppable, storm personified. He tossed the card in front of his companion, who screwed up his eyes, and announced "0.076% - looks like you were right, buddy."

The small tilt back on the stool and the *I know* gesture all failed to endear him to Red Cap and Company, but he was oblivious to his abrasiveness, merely scanning the top shelf of the bar for some exotic liquor to absorb.

Red Cap was deep in thought, staring at the card and the Estimator alternately. The desire to become physical with him was apparent and seemed to be shared by his friend. The Estimator's brusqueness appeared almost to be calculated to offend. I felt that this was my time to intervene.

I moved to the bar, casually positioning myself between the Estimator and his adversaries. I kept my back to him as I ordered another Guinness, watching the indignation of Red Cap and friend as they realized that someone had infringed their personal space. With my body turned sideways to the bar as it was, I was facing them, and almost identical they were, beards and boiler-suits, but unexpectedly carefully groomed. Subtly, I showed them my badge, while behind me the Estimator crooned a sing song rendition of rice wine brand names. Their eyes widened, they looked me carefully in the face, sudden, and quietly left, glancing over their shoulders almost compassionately. Although with compassion for my quarry or me, I knew not. I waited for them to make their way out of the almost deserted bar before I began.

I turned to face him. "You are impressive, sir," I began. He simply eyed me dispassionately and ran a finger through his silver hair. "Let me buy you a drink," I added, and that made more sense to him and he smiled crookedly.

"I never refuse that offer," he whispered, and I had to strain to hear him.

"Let us try a booth, sir. I feel it would be better for conversation," I

suggested and took his elbow. He looked loath to be so far away from the bar, but he came, reluctantly.

Facing him across the grimy table in the booth, I studied him directly while he was far away for a moment. It was the face of the man in the photograph I had in my breast pocket, the man I was looking for, simply declined since the picture was taken. His clothes were sombre, but not shoddy, scrupulously clean.

"Your name, sir?" I asked. "I do like to know who I'm drinking with."

"Cameron. James Hardy Cameron." It slipped out, and he made an awkward gesture in front of his mouth as if he were trying to grasp the words before they got away from him. It was the man I'd been looking for.

"Indeed, Mr Cameron. And how did a Talent like you come to be playing party tricks in bars like this?"

I was as direct as that, and that seemed to startle him. He rubbed the back of each hand slowly, methodically, and I noticed that they were redened and raw from an action oft repeated. My simple question was unexpected. Most would shy away from acknowledging a Talent, preferring to believe that it was all a trick, a piece of foolery. Talents were simply too rare to mix with Normals as Cameron was doing.

"I . . ." he croaked, and his eyes darted to his glass which was half full. He finished it quickly and gestured to the barman who neatly served him another, one with the Detox added that I had given the barman earlier. Cameron would get no drinker.

He tasted me, and held my eyes briefly, innocently. I caught a glimpse of the man that was, a charmer, the man of no convictions, then he was gone, and I had a man, the bleached skeleton, the bare driftwood, the flotsam.

"I am a Talent, you know," he began, as if I disbelieved it. "And I was the best damned Estimator around. But I've lost it, most of it anyway. Bits and pieces have clung on. Like the stuff you saw tonight. Rubbish. Bins staff. It makes me sick. Scum de la scum."

He was open now, and I let him go.

I remember finding out about what I was, he continued. The folks were dead scared when they thought they'd produced a Talent. They didn't know what to do. I know now that they had it. Good, that is. Money. I was a bunch of dollar signs to them, or a chance that they'd be sacrificed. Christ, it must have been hard on them.

I was a Raw Talent too. I came from nowhere. No Talent on either side of the family. Nowhere. Just me. And no computer enhancement either. Just me. I could do it all, I just needed to be asked. Height, weight, volume, time, concentration, proportions, the lot. Third, fourth, fifth order Estimations. And accurate, too. Christ, I was accurate. The Bay Extortionists found out when the City got me to test their water - pronto. Point five parts per trillion I found. I told them to pay him, fast. Their machines were useless.

And that's what us Talents had over machines. We could do what they did, but faster, with judgement, and easier. It was easier to ship us around than all the testing gear and the computer backup. Cost efficient too. Even at our prices. Even at my prices.

The best get paid the most, and I was the best I had so far, so travel made no never mind. But only first class, and any damned thing else I wanted. And only guaranteed clients. I was no charity. That's how I mainly worked for the SpaceLine companies, the Energy people, the Resource developers. Good payers they were.

I loved clothes. Good stuff. Natural fibres. Silk, wool. I loved the feel of them.

Fame was part of it too, of course. Reputation and fame were pretty hard hand in hand, and a few public triumphs didn't hurt, of course. The arduous incident on Miranda was great. The pilot died or something, the only passenger had never flown before. I had to provide estimates of wind velocity, air pressure, air speed and cloud density, because all the instruments were out. Immediate response needed. It tested over me. She cracked up on landing, but the passenger was okay in the bubble. Good coverage out of that.

Interviews, demonstrations and books. I never said no. Then came those damned, damned, damned New Puritans. I don't know how they got an appointment even. Margie must've felt sorry for them or something. I don't know how they even got into the building for Christ's sake, let alone the sixty-eighth floor! Goodearth Jones, Ethical Mancini and Compost Wilson. Compost Wilson? How could anyone call their kid Compost? But that's what those fanatics did all the time, and worse.

I know I liked natural fibres, but I preferred them finely woven and cut. Those guys looked like they were dressed in hessian sacks or something. The two men had beards, naturally, and the woman just had her hair pulled back, pony-tail wise.

I remember the meeting clearly, worse luck. "Mr Hardy," she said. "We need your help."

"Can you afford it?" I batted in bluntness. "I'm very expensive."

"We can," she said primly, glancing at Compost Wilson, who was obviously the money man. "We know your rates." She said this with some distaste, as much at the things I used the money for as at the money itself. I guessed.

These New Puritans were not my sort at all. Fanatics of any kind weren't. At least the New Puritans seemed reasonably constructive, and consistent, and didn't spend their lives blowing up people who don't think like they did. I just found them a bit self-righteous, stuck up even.

"We have a planet," she continued, surprising me. The new tachyon probes had been finding plenty of habitable planets, and hundreds of seasonal intercomets, crackpot and otherwise, had taken the chance and bought one and left Earth so they could have a whole world for themselves. Some were lucky to last a year. I just didn't think the New Puritans had the money, and I didn't think that they'd give up on good old Terra either. But enough was enough, I suppose. A whole virgin world was pretty tempting, even to a Puritan.

"Mr Hardy," she struggled on gamely. "We have used almost all our money. We cannot afford the survey and sampling equipment we need. Our only choice is to have you come to Cromwell for a month, so we can see you. Weather, water, soil, vegetation, animals, all need to be tested and analysed

As well, we have a considerable time pressure. We are aiming at total self-sufficiency, in accordance with our principles, Mr Hardy. For the first month on our new world, we will use help from outside, such as yourself. After that month we excommunicate ourselves, as it were. We will withdraw from the rest of the human race."

She was determined, committed, even I could see that. "Mr Hardy, with your help, we may be successful. We have some computer backup, but it's your speed we need, and versatility. We need the best."

It wasn't flattery, I knew. She wouldn't have deigned to flatter me, in any case.

I leaned back in my chair, and looked out over the smog. Her parents did right when they named her Ethical. She wore her principles like armour.

"Guaranteed fee?" I asked.

"Of course," said Wilson through gritted teeth.

"And guaranteed passage home after one month?"

"Yes." More grit.

"Okay." It could be fun.

They left flaring, but I was in a seller's market. They had to have me, and they knew I knew it.

Even the first view of Cromwell as we came out of transit was enough to tell me that the New Puritans were on a winner. They'd said they were gambling on insufficient data as to its Earthlike Correspondence Index, but I could see why they went with it. It looked so good, so blue and beautiful, with just the strange continents to show that it wasn't Earth.

Really, the Earthlike Correspondence Index didn't have to be more than .75 or .8 to sustain a colony. Tailored bacteria and anti-allergenic could take care of the differences, and soil additives or gene-spliced vegetation could overcome problems with the soil. But Cromwell looked a .9 or better. They may have stumbled on a bargain.

I could see the two continents on the face towards us, a small, ragged lump in the northern hemisphere, obscured by clouds, and an altogether more promising southern mass, green and watered even from this distance. Ethical pointed over my shoulder. "On the eastern edge of the south land, that large ever emptying into that V-shaped bay, that's the Settlement." I could even hear the capital letters of pride in her voice.

The freighter we were on was their last. They had no funds left, apart from my fee and my prepaid journey off this world. Compost had shown me through one of the cargo holds and became relatively expensive: seeds, medicines, some machinery, frozen embryos for stock. They were New Puritans, but they weren't stupid. They didn't hate all technology like the Neo-Luddites, they just avoided the dirty stuff. They went into solar, wind, renewable resources, back to the earth. Cromwell was going to be the last stand for their twelve thousand strong band. They'd severed all connections with the outside. Stiff-necked bastards, but honourable in their own way.

When we landed, I saw why they were optimistic. It was a place to be optimistic in. Settlement was warm, but not too much so - because of the

sea breeze. Goodearth Jones told me that the seasons here were gentle: "Enough for variety, not too much for irritation," he'd say.

In the early days it was chaotic. People were everywhere, testing, building, planning. Nothing was done without an Environment Effect Study, and the Tachyon Relay Communicator was used constantly before they reached the one month deadline. One month before coventry. Bloody fanatics.

They certainly wanted their money's worth though, they were worldly enough for that. As soon as we were down, I was whisked off to talk to agronomists, meteorologists – stock breeders even! I had to breathe, eat and sleep the planet, taste, feel, be the damned thing! Just when I'd finish grating lime salts in a water sample, I'd have a lumber sample to test for density.

My consolation, though, was that I wasn't alone. Those damned Puritans knew how to push themselves. Some of them just gave up sleep, I think. I was lucky to get three hours a night but whenever I staggered from my cot, there was Goodearth or Ethical or one of dozens of others, gravely saying hello, shoving a cup of something hot into my hand, and dragging me off to some damned heap of dung or other.

And they wanted it to work. My God, how they wanted it to work. There was one young fish farmer – ichthyologist really – who I found once when I was making a break. She was slumped at the semi-dark, over some trays in one of the lab huts – weeping. She didn't know I was there until I cleared my throat. Some people they were, and this was the most emotional I'd ever seen one of them. But she wasn't embarrassed. She was too distraught. She couldn't make it work. Her program of fish hatching was just not coming together, she explained to me through her tears. Red-haired and tiny, she hardly seemed like sturdy parenting stock, and when she stumbled against me as she paced in front of her samples, I knew she was on the edge of collapse from exhaustion. But she kept going. Aquaculture was vital to their survival, and she was willing to push herself to extremes to do it.

I was able to help her. She would have seen it herself if the huts'd been so tired. It was a simple matter of water temperature that was holding her up. She was so grateful, I was embarrassed. She made me think.

It was around then I sold them out.

I got a sealed personal transmission in that third week. Anonymous. All it did was offer me a fortune to sell the Puritans out. It even told me how to do it. Someone had access to samples from Cromwell and had worked out that it had a subtle soil deficiency. Just a few trace elements: copper, cobalt, molybdenum – stuff like that. Very traces, but enough to run any earth-based plants and animal – slowly. It even made aquaculture unviable. All I had to do was make a few mistakes in the concentrations of these elements so the Puritans would think everything was okay, and a hundred million in a Swiss Bank would be mine.

I'd never made a mistake before. I was good. I was strong. I didn't make mistakes. But I'd also never been offered a hundred million before.

Who were they? I don't know. Developers probably. Those poor New Puritans were probably sitting on top of some rich deposit of something or other, so some developer wanted them out. I don't know.

I took it. I took the Puritans' money too – smiling. If I didn't, someone else would, I told myself. They'd get out, I said. They're not stupid.

My charter ship picked me up on the dock, and as I stood on the ramp, they thanked me. They took me by the hand and thanked me. Goodearth Jones, Ethical Mancini, Comput Wilson, each solemnly, calmly, thanked me for my help. And I stood there smiling, wished them luck and walked up the ramp, mentally counting my silver.

For the first time since he had begun his story, Hardy looked up from his unattached drink. He wasn't shivering; he wasn't pale. He was unmanfully self-possessed, a statue almost, a tableau of grief and self-diagnos.

It was a couple of years later, he continued, eyes on his drink once again, I found out that they were dead. All dead. A ship from some development company happened by, and got no response on standard approach signal. So they investigated.

Twelve thousand people dead. Starvation mostly, although there seemed to be some sort of enthusiasm towards the end. Apparently the plants failed, the wheat, the rice, the vegetables, and the stock died through the stagers or something like it. Nothing survived, but those damned, damned New Puritans kept trying. They were doomed, but they kept trying, trusting my estimations. Damn them.

I let the money go. I couldn't touch it. I started making errors in my estimations, especially the higher order ones. I lost custom.

And that's why I'm here.

Hardy did not look up when he finished, nor did I say anything. I simply watched his shumped figure and saw the despair gradually leave him like a second, unwanted skin. He felt it too, for he looked up, perturbed, then briefly angry, before a mask sealed his face tightly. He stared full into my face for the first time, the mask sealing the furious emotions inside. He made to grab at my arm but withdrew.

"You're an Absolver, aren't you?" he hissed. "Aren't you?"

I didn't answer. "Leave me alone," he whispered tightly. "Leave me alone! Give it back to me!"

A few lone figures in the bar were beginning to look our way, started by Hardy's distress, try as he might to hide it. I motioned to the barman, and he muttered to his patrons who quickly averted their gaze.

"Damn you! Leave me alone! Give me back my pain! I need it! I want it! Let me have it back, you bastard! I want . . ."

His voice subsided, throatily, as he looked inside himself and could not find what he was looking for. He held me then, with his gaze steady, venom warring with desire. "You bastard. It was mine."

He rose more swiftly than I imagined he could and was gone.

I toyed with the beer mat for a moment, reflecting, absorbing his pain. He would understand, by and by.

I stood and nodded to the barman, who responded wanly, respectfully, and then I beaved the light outside. Time to go home.

“ . . . AND THEY SHALL WANDER ALL THEIR DAYS ”

By David Tansey

THEY say the eyes are the soul's mirror. Monk doubted it, for if he looked at them in the mirror nowadays, he saw nothing there. Those grey eyes looking back at him were distorted, of course, by the low sheen of a transparent plastic face-plate. Maybe his soul had fled. That's it - it got scared when we left Earth so far behind, when any galaxy visible from Earth dwindled far behind on the monitors.

Hey, Lewis, do you think our souls have fled us?

He rarely tried to find his soul, even in the small mirror set in the bulkhead. Such obsession was depressing. Each cycle when he was awakened, he performed aerometrics, the only exercise possible in the confines of the orbitless. Clumsy fingers inside padded spacesuit gloves make poor fists, but in his existence, aerophy snapped the heels of spofity. Five minutes of that, a brief check of his suit tank's gauge to ensure no-one had siphoned his air while he slept, then Monk was ready to face the shift. The suit fed him intravenously and took his wastes away.

He punched a button with his finger, causing the door to hiss aside. Beyond was another cubicle. He was surprised to see two suited figures lying there asleep, entwined. The stencilled summaries on their helmets told him their identities. One male, one female. Strangely, that brought some relief. In the half-gravity Monk propelled himself through the door. There was barely enough room for him to squeeze by the others to reach the far exit. He jostled them unintentionally - they stirred but didn't waken. They were all too used to rubbing shoulders aboard the ship.

He emerged from the outer door, leaving the cubicles behind like overstuffed coffins. The next chamber was Control. The ship had no corridors, no anterooms - floor space was at a premium.

Monk half-fleeted, half-clawed his way to Station 24. Once seated before the interface, he used the jack to connect his suit PC with the ship's computer. The crew member on the shift before him was still plugged in. There was a short period when both men were hooked into the ship through the same dual port. For five seconds Monk caught electronic snow and glimpses of nightmares, by-products of the other's sensory interface. Then the other unplugged and moved away, as if hypnotised. Monk went on full stream.

He was one with the ship. He saw through its eyes - the external videoscans and telescopes - except there was nothing to see. Total blackness spread on all sides, a void which made him giddy. It was the same every shift. Once it had been different - there had been stars and planets to observe as they passed - but that was so long ago, it didn't seem real. For ten years the picture relayed to his mind's eye had been an unchanging blank.

He thought of the sleeping couple he had climbed over. What sort of future

did their desperate claim on each other have? Were they hoarding oxygen until they had enough to seal their compartment, flood it temporarily, and remove their suits and consummate the relationship? Monk remembered having done just that many years ago, perhaps two years after the oxygen-generators had been sabotaged. Which of the women crew had he been with? The effort of recall was too much. He turned his attention to the scanners instead.

The ship's voyage of discovery had not been a complete failure - they had learned of the existence of the mandalas. As millions of stars comprise a galaxy, so do millions of galaxies form the slowly revolving, doughnut-shaped mandalas. Until their mission nobody else had ever been far enough out to see one in its entirety.

Seoto's development of the Much Faster Than Light drive had allowed colonisation of other planets some decades ago. The drive was taking man to every part of the Milky Way to find new homes. In the excitement, the *Melmoth* expedition had been assembled, the first attempt to reach a different galaxy. That objective had been too easily achieved, in fact the ship, consisting mainly of huge fuel tanks, had overhotted all the galaxies. Monk wondered if anyone back on Earth remembered them.

The space between each mandala, they'd also discovered, was a near-perfect vacuum. The ship had left the outermost mandala bolted ten years ago, a decade of cutting through empty space, the nose cone sensors flucking out for light-years, like a blind man swinging his cane in an empty room, unaware that the room's walls have been cractly taken away.

Monk's gloved finger danced over the interface. There were no buttons to push, only monitors with menus he had to select from with the maze built into his index fingertips. He was not supposed to take his attention from the scanners, but after so long of looking, he wasn't about to start feeling guilty.

“Hey, Lewis, you there?”

No reply. He did a calculation and realised Lewis should be having his recreation period - meaning he was in his sleeping cubicle.

Eventually a tired response came.

“I'm here. And I'm not here. This is not real. We've all faded into ghosts. We're all dead and gone to hell and don't know it.”

“Don't be such a dickhead.”

“What do you want?”

“What I always want.”

What you always want - relief from total boredom.”

“How's the view?”

“Same as always.”

“See you later -”

“Wait! I've got a problem for you, Lewis. Imagine you're in a spaceship, travelling through totally empty space, with no stars for triangulation -”

“I don't have to imagine that, shut-for-brains. I'm doing it.”

“So how do you know you're moving at all?”

“The computer tells you you are.”

“What if the computer is lying? Suppose there's an emergency back-up

program when the drive fails, to make the crew think they're still moving, so they don't lose heart?"

"Interesting. I'll have to think about that one. It might kill an hour."

"Glad to be of service. I hope -"

Monk passed and caught his breath. For an instant a tiny white dot had impinged on the field of black inside his brain.

"Monk? Monkey, you all right?"

"Lewis, do you think the computer lies to us? Can a computer break a Command?"

"Maybe. But who would hear its confession?"

The white dot grew and painfully intensified inside his head. It was a nagging memory of things half-forgotten. A woman's face. A snow-white dove spreading its wings in the twilight distance.

Silence.

Lewis' anxious voice broke in. "You okay? Remember, we made a pact, not to go crazy like the rest of them. I'll come up and check on you." Monk could barely hear his friend. His brain had been torn in two by the approaching whiteness. Shiftless, you neglected the Scanners. The computer was already slowing the ship. The whiteness was now a wall that filled his mind, a mind shattered, after so much void, by the concept of the thing.

A few minutes later a glove fell upon his shoulder. He revivified and saw Lewis standing over him. There was a bright light behind Lewis so that Monk could only see the outline of his helmet. His face-plate was in darkness.

Monk pointed to the space port. "Look at it."

"I know," said Lewis.

* * *

Later, the computer's impersonal, sexless voice posted a general bulletin on all comm channels. It even woke the one-third of the crew on their sleeping shift, so important was the announcement.

"Attention. We are approaching a solid body. Distance 82 million light years. A spherical formation, diameter 1.15 times Earth. Possibly an orbited planet. Preliminary scanning shows the surface composed of frozen matter.

"Deceleration will commence as soon as all crew are in the stabilization bays. Preparations should be made for landing and EVA. End."

* * *

After the painful deceleration process from Much Faster Than Light to intra-system speed, Monk struggled the webbing from his suit and crawled out of the stabilization chamber. The other crew members were slowly doing the same, like dried up insects coming to life in a spider web.

An unknown animal called *Hope* had thawed. When Monk observed it in the others, he looked graced and recognized it in himself. He even checked the mirror in the oculolette, to see if his soul had returned. There was a flicker of brightness that had not been there before - was that it?

It had been good timing, another few years and they would have been

killing each other for the last air reserves. Or the better, stater among them would have done the honorable thing through the airlock.

As soon as everyone was out of stabilization, the computer requested a conference. Monk plugged his suit PC into the nearest communal port, as all the other crew members would be doing. The mission had no captain, and it relied on collective decision-making. Over many years the number involved in these conferences had slowly dropped off, so he was surprised to now find all except two (who were considered beyond help) joined to the network.

"Computer Melvick calling conference number 137. This is being recorded."

"We shall be making contact with the object in 2.43 hours, ship time. The scanners show it to have a frozen surface. If this surface includes frozen H₂O, it will represent a significant resource. If possible the ship will make a landing."

"If you have any motions, now is the time to present them."

Nobody responded to this. Usually, the computer presented its best course of action, and any crew member could introduce a variation and it would be voted upon. Monk took his attention briefly away from the network to study the tiny eye-high monitor in his helmet. The approaching ice mass was available. Of course, it had to be viewed through infra-red (it was hotter than the void surrounding it), as there were no natural light sources such as stars to reflect their illumination off it.

The object soon filled the whole monitor screen. Monk manipulated the zoom controls. The white surface looked like a perfectly smooth wall. It was translucent but did not glitter as he remembered ice.

"Monk, this is Lewis." The voice came to him along a side channel, avoiding the network. "Is this for real? Do we have a chance, after so long?"

"I think we do."

"Is it fair drinkin'? Not some computer generation? After all, the only reason we oversee the scanners is that there's been some talk of the computer coming us."

"This looks like the real thing. I was there, remember, when it appeared on the scanners. That couldn't be faked."

Lewis was quiet for a while. In the silence the computer cut in.

"Computer again. I would like volunteers for an EVA party, following landing in 42 minutes. If there are no volunteers within 30 minutes, I will nominate appropriate crew members. If you have any motions, now is the time to present them."

"Engineer Val Lewis volunteering."

"Navigator Perita Lamarek volunteering."

Well, I was the first to sight the thing, Monk thought. May as well go all the way.

"Sociologist Arthur Monk volunteering."

* * *

Close up, the surface of the ice mass was far from smooth. There were great rifts - deep enough to hide whole cities - and slender, twisting protrusions, more frozen swirls than mountains. There were cracks, holes, cross,

arches, and toppled over each other, were huge caims of iceberg-sized chunks calved from the main mass.

An orphaned planet? Monk wondered. *A gaseous planet that lost its sun and quickly froze? But what was it doing so far from any star system?* The scanners told them of a surface gravity slightly less than Earth's. Monk was forced for the first time to wonder if the ice planet was not a natural object, but the product of unseen hands. It was too presidential, too convenient.

The *Meibnoth* manoeuvred through the surface distortions and located an elevated plain suitable for the landing.

In the service module in its underbelly, Monk felt the strain and vibration as the heavy craft sought to slowly set down. He and the other two had donned heavy protective working suits over their day-to-day suits. Their helmets were like steel bullet caps, lacking face-plates. On the near eye-high panels, they monitors were linked to dual external telescopes on swivel mounts. Monk manipulated the feed line valve, providing extra, precious oxygen for the imminent exertion.

He looked at Lewis and Larnarck, his bullet-headed siblings. The chamber was barely large enough for the three. Movement was restricted, but he was intent on keeping his body tamed, so he could watch the bulkhead monitor with its picture of the white surface rising to meet the landing legs. The impact of landing jolted him painfully for a second, then the ship was floating.

The landing jets had heaved the region around the *Meibnoth*. For several seconds it was floating on a boiling sea, then a placid lake, then the surface re-freeze burying the ship to its lower deck. The computer quickly sent an assurance to everyone that when it came time to lift off again they could easily burn their way out.

Because they were now under ground level, the three EVA party were forced to climb to the deck above. Monk clambered through the airlock, followed by Lewis and Larnarck. As they were on an open channel, Monk felt no urge to carry on his usual banter with the cynical Lewis.

The outer door blasted open. Monk had to keep his emotions in rein as he saw limitless open space after the ship's constrictions. Floodlights illuminated great swathes of open ground, which now glittered and reflected the light back from a thousand jumbled angular planes. He stepped out onto the frozen surface. Monk was used to the half-gravity of the ship, and the weight of the protective shell he carried in this near-normal gravity was enough to bring him to a halt.

"Like walking in treacle." It was Lewis' complaining tone.

Monk took several difficult steps forward until the *Meibnoth* was behind him rather than over him. The ship was shining a light at each of its many corners so that it was delineated as a constellation enclosing a black hole. The hull had been hammering in his ears when he stood in the lock, but now a heavy silence filled the empty air.

The landscape was a plain broken by insane sculptures that twisted and obeyed no law of form or art. Three shadows flicked ahead of them, ghosts exploring an empty, dead world and its random formations. Monk, aware all

the crew's eyes were upon him, gave the computer the signal to lower the vacuum hose.

The hose extended from the ship like a metal phallos three metres wide. Reticulated arms grided it out to where Monk, Lewis and Larnarck waited. When it came to within their arm reach, Lewis grabbed the control ring and steered it to a patch of level ice.

The meshed mouth of the hose razed the ground, warmed it to melting temperature, and began to suck up the fluids and half-melted chunks. Lewis and Larnarck stood one each side of it, guiding its operation while Monk overawed them and studied the surroundings.

The vacuum hose drew the frozen matter into the ship's converters. Monk did not understand how the converters worked; he only knew that anything could be fed into one end and valuable elements extracted from the other. In the case of frozen water, as might be encountered in an asteroid, oxygen would be separated and pumped into long storage tanks while the hydrogen would be sent to the drive fuel tanks.

Monk overheard snippets of conversation from the techs, in Control, as they analysed what was being converted.

"Plenty of H₂O, as well as other elements. Over fifty different elements and compounds identified in the first three minutes . . ."

" . . . as well as plenty of compounds the computer can't identify."

"Did you manage to get a dating on the samples?"

" . . . the date can only register up to twenty billion years old, and the samples are off the scale . . ."

Monk was impressed with the variety of the ice's composition.

Almost as if they were trying to cater for every possible life form that might wander hither.

But who were they?

An hour later the converters were still gorging themselves. Monk knew they should soon be reaching their capacity. Yet hardly a dent had been put in the plain. With luck they could be fully milked and away from here before whatever gods owned this piece of real estate noticed them.

Monk saw white dastings of ice appear around the joints of his outer suit. "What's the temperature out here?" he asked. "I'm starting to become part of the scenery."

"A constant -150 degrees Celsius," a tech answered in his ear. "Scanner shows it gets colder the deeper you go under the surface. There are indications of a nucleus. Whatever this is, it isn't a planet."

A nucleus, thought Monk. Like a small star radiating cold instead of heat.

"Any idea what the nucleus is composed of? Is it artificial?"

"Too deep to tell. We're working on it."

Lewis asked that one of the others relieve him at the hose control. Monk took the control ring from him. Lewis walked about in slow circles, trying to keep his limbs from freezing. The effort of it was laborious. Monk noticed that, despite the weight of his lead-lined outer armour, Lewis' boots were not making the slightest impression in the crystalline ground.

An amber light glowed inside Monk's helmet. It warned him that the suit's thermal circuits were nearing overload.

He looked across the whitewashed plain. It was so wide there was no visible curvature in the distance. The ice just went on and on until such a natural feature as a Himalaya-sized range obscured further topographical formations. The place was absolutely still and had been absolutely silent for a vast age before the *Melmoth's* arrival. Monk could easily imagine this was the place the dead people screamed about in their nightmares.

He turned to look at the ship. Ice was packed around it as though absorbing the ship. Monk felt a longing to drop the control ring, to run for the sanctuary of its metal walls. He felt confused. He wanted to get the ship turned around, return to Earth. It was a longing he had not experienced for years. The lights beaming along the hump back of the ship sent a burning sensation through Monk, a yearning for the brightness of Earth's skies.

What are we doing in this place? There are some places in the universe that was not meant to go, and this is one of them.

He gulped and the confusion, the homesickness, passed.

Concentrate on the task.

Monk reminded himself that, like the rest of the crew, he had bought a one-way ticket on the *Melmoth*. That's why they'd chosen him, along with forty-three other Australians, a people used to wide, empty expanses. Australia was a society not firmly rooted in its past, it had no cultural blinkers. No other nationality could have coped, they'd said.

The control ring abraded in his padded hands. He moved its voracious mouth to another place in the ice.

The interruption woke him from his reverie. He looked around and saw Lewis walking off into the darkness behind a frozen pillar. He swallowed, seeking Portia.

She stood some three metres behind him. Her helmet was pointed directly at Monk. He knew she had been staring at him.

Monk selected a private comm channel. "I'm sorry . . ." he started

"It was me!"

"Please forgive . . ." he stammered.

Then he remembered Lewis.

"Lewis, where are you?"

"Behind this hill."

"What are you doing?"

"Thinking."

Monk hesitated, waiting for the other to say what was troubling him.

"Monk, with all this ice our tanks must be full now, eh?"

"Sure."

"That means the mission keeps going. So what if we have to fly for another ten years before we find something? What's the next step? Arrangements of mandalas into even larger formations, ad infinitum?"

"Maybe. Or perhaps we'll enter a completely different type of space. Maybe that ten-year emptiness was some sort of dividing line."

"Maybe, maybe - all speculation."

"I can't offer you anything else. So why not come back now, and we'll see how they're doing in the ship?"

At that moment an alarm buzzed in Monk's helmet. The vacuum hose died. He looked at the hose mouth, saw something lodged in the mesh. It was a pyramid-shaped piece of something metallic.

"What's the hold up?" a tech asked.

"Obstruction . . . clearing it now."

Monk looked around first. Lewis was approaching, but distant. Portia was halfway back to the ship.

He bent and plucked the metal object from the mesh. It was not heavy. He held it up so one of the floodlights.

For a second or two Monk felt a sensation similar to that of being united with the ship's scanner interface. An image was flashed across his mind's eye. A composition of light and peace. There were other minds, he sensed, somewhere in there, but the overall impression was of something so different he might have been an ape trying to make sense of the Sydney Opera House or the Melbourne Star Tower. The image went away.

"Watcha got there, Monk?"

The presence of Lewis brought Monk to reality. "An artefact of some kind. I thought I saw something . . ."

"Looks damaged. The hose must have chewed it up."

The vacuum restarted.

"Never mind. Let's finish here and get back inside. I'm getting tired."

* * *

The metal pyramid was placed into a quarantine capsule, to be later analysed by the techs. When the inner airlock door opened, Monk was confronted by an unrecognisable sight. It was Gregory, one of the tech assistants, wearing only his thermal underwear. The fabric was black with accumulated dirt and sweat. The sight of a man without his suit, and still alive, was a shock to Monk's system.

"Here, let me help you with those covers. The whole ship has already been filled with oxygen."

The man was smiling, something else Monk had all but forgotten.

Monk used his PIN number to authorise his PC to unlock the various components of his suit. First he snapped loose his helmet and pulled it off. He blinked at the unfamiliarity of unshaded light glaring into his eyes. He looked at Portia and Lewis who were also hastily removing their outer skins, segment by segment.

Next Monk removed the breather tubes from over his nose and mouth, and disconnected the oxygen feed. Inhaling deeply, he felt dizzy. There was no need to take careful breaths now. He unlocked the suit PC and closed down the power unit. He unstrapped the waste sacs, which Gregory carried away for disposal. In a few minutes the prime and spare oxygen bottles, the medical unit, the water and nutrition feeds lay on the metal decking at his feet. With distress he saw his thermal underwear was as grimy as Gregory's.

Portia giggled. "I suppose we all stink. But we're so used to it we don't notice."

Monk saw his reflection in the face-plate of his abandoned helmet. His hair had been cropped to one centimetre before he had donned the suit a decade earlier, and a reticent gel had kept it at that length. Likewise, his lower face showed only a blue shadow.

He left the stinky chamber, half-floating and half-climbing through the many tight compartments of the *Melnoth*. His fellow crew members had reacted in various ways to their new-found freedom, most were joyous, but others stood staring at the bulkheads or lay curled up into balls. Some moved through the ship as if zombies. In one of the chambers, a group were laughing and splashing as they took turns to bathe in an water tank. Between baths the water was pumped away, and fresh, pure water from a larger tank poured in to replace it. Monk removed his underwear, pushed it through the mouth of an incinerator, and took his turn in the tank. He lay under the crystal clear, cold water, dreaming it was the creek running near his home town in southern New South Wales.

Monk filled his lungs with air and stayed under the water as long as possible. He thought of the image the pyramid had transferred to him. Even though he couldn't understand it, he didn't doubt it had been real. But he couldn't bring himself to mention it in an official report. It was indescribable.

Monk emerged from the tank feeling reborn.

I wouldn't have missed coming here for the world.

After hearty back-sloppings and unadmitted crying and shouting, Monk left the others and crawled into his toiletette. The tension went from him as he spread out, and he soon slept.

I have seen the multitudes spouting through space. What more could I see?

What do you dream of when you've seen everything? The world in the pyramid? The planet of light and peace?

In the darkness he felt a warm presence on his naked body. He put a hand out and encountered the control board running along the cubicle wall. He waved his arm in the air, meeting the smooth flesh of another human.

"It's been a long time, Portia."

"Tomorrow we are lost again. We must make the most of now."

Their mouths met, and Monk was wholly human once again. Outside the *Melnoth* the ice creaked and settled, and someone had the presence of mind to turn off all the lights. Both ship and swirling landscape bathed as one in the natural blackness.

* * *

"This is computer *Melnoth*." The computer and the ship shared the same name, as the former's circuitry was inextricably merged with the latter's mechanics.

"Calling conference number 138. This is being recorded."

Monk was still groggy from sleep. He wondered how he could hear the computer's voice after being disconnected from his suit, and then realised the voice issued from a tiny speaker grill in the control panel.

"Status report: all tanks and loose canisters have now full levels of pure oxygen. The drive units are fully fuelled. It is recommended the mission be renewed as soon as possible. Now is the time -"

"I want to propose a variation."

The voice cutting in belonged to Lewis.

Monk tried to sit up but found he could not as Portia's weight lay atop him. She breathed softly, in the process of waking. "My motion," said Lewis calmly, "is that we abandon the mission. We stay here using the ice's resources. We have unlimited air and water. We can make food easy enough. What about having children, going back to Earth? Sure, it'd take twenty or more years. We'll grow old, or die, but at least our children will enjoy Earth."

There was a pause of some minutes. Monk listened to the silence. He could imagine the computer digesting the proposition, turning over the awkward possibility of its own best course being rejected.

"Mission number 32 has been registered. All will now vote. Please voice-print ident yourself to the nearest speaker, and state eye or say to Engineer Lewis' motion."

Monk looked into Portia's face. Her eyes were wide in the half-light of the control panel's glow. He leaned toward the speaker grill. "Ident: Monk. Vote . . . nay."

Portia moved sideways to the panel, her bare breasts swishing across his chest. "Ident: Lammack. Vote . . . yea."

It took a few minutes for all the crew to register their votes, but it was a process the computer could handle from all parts of the ship simultaneously.

"Result of vote on motion number 32: Total votes available: 37. Abstaining: 11. Aye: 10. Nay: 16, including computer's vote. The motion is not carried."

Monk sat up, holding the woman tightly. Their shoes heads rubbed against the padded ceiling of the confined chamber. He could not find the words to tell her about the world shown to him by the pyramid, a place he had no doubt they would one day reach.

"Mission will be resumed in three hours," continued the computer. "In order to maximise oxygen supplies, all crew are required to put on their day suits again. In one hour the general oxygen release within the hall will be closed. End."

From some other compartment nearby a high scream of despair reached Monk and Portia.

* * *

Three hours later the underside of the *Melnoth* blazed as the jets were fired. The surrounding ice melted, boiled, then reset when the vessel lifted away.

Monk was at Station 23, hooked into the short-range scanners. Good try, Lewis, but nothing is more important than the mission. He was fully enveloped by the suit once more. Its presence almost smothered him after the brief freedom he had enjoyed.

The infra-red picture of the ice landscape filled his head. The ship was

rising steadily, slowly, its tanks glistened with all the air and water they could hold. Monk carefully studied the contours of the ice, its intricate variety.

"Monk, can you hear me?" asked Lewis.

"Yeah. Can't say you didn't try. How ya feeling?"

"I'll cope. Not about to cut off my oxygen supply, or anything. How's the view?"

"See for yourself." Monk moved his fingertip mouse to the option allowing Lewis to look over his shoulder.

"Listen. It's probably best that we continue the mission. You know that alien artefact under the ice. It showed me something, a picture – of the things that left this ice here."

Even to Monk's own ears, what he was saying sounded unbelievable. "I bet the whole ice mass is studded with those pyramids. They're a kind of postcard. A small inspiration."

"It's not that I don't believe you, Monk. It's just that you could be trying to cheer me up."

A few seconds later, the ship rose over a fifty thousand metre high ridge, and Monk felt like the Lovecraftian character who first saw what lay on the other side of the Mountains of Madness.

There was a great bowl in the landscape, a random formation of high crests enclosing a wide plain. In the bowl's centre were some structures that did not even belong in this incomprehensible place. He only had a brief glance, but it was enough to form an eternal picture in Monk's memory.

There lay on that plain, a round and rusty metal oval shape, almost completely covered with ice. Monk instantly sensed it as a fellow alien. It had been broken down over millions of years, its basic elements gradually becoming the stuff it was set in. A small distance away, an ice ridge had been carved with square windows, and pillars had been set in front of them. There was evidence these lost explorers had attempted to landform the region surrounding their craft.

Then the vision was gone. "Did you see that?" Lewis asked.

"That's what we would be like one day if we tried to stay."

And I wonder, he thought, how many others we would find if we had time to search. A museum of all space exploration?

Silence from the other end of the comm line.

The *Meletoth* angled upward and left the ice's gravity behind. "Thirty minutes to MFTL mode," came the computer's voice. "Crew see to encase themselves in the stabilisation chambers."

"Lewis?"

"Yeah?" He sounded tired.

"I think I've got it now. We weren't meant to stay here. This ice is only a . . . what's the word? . . . waystation, on the way to somewhere else. It's got every possible element in deep freeze, to help whatever life form might come along. There must be plenty of these places . . . arranged in a nice-field pattern so any passing ship must hit at least one."

Monk unplugged from the interface and made his way to the stabilisation chamber. He released his link with Lewis up to the last possible moment.

"Lewis?"

"Just a few metres from you."

"Portia?"

"Here."

"Can we hack it?"

"Think so."

A second later the computer took them to MFTL speed. The ice vanished. Monk kept a single thought uppermost in his mind: a place of . . . light and peace.

NIGHTWINGS

By Sue Isle

THE storm followed a screaming black flight of cockatoos low over the crouching suburb. It removed a roof or two, delivered the coup de grace to an awkward leaning tree, boomed through grey-green skies like an invasion force of F-16s, and alerted out the power to Ben Farrell's computer.

He lost the rest of the short story he'd been puzzling out for some hours. This was no small annoyance since he didn't make notes and hadn't saved the text. He hastily scribbled out what he could remember - a few paragraphs, and belatedly switched off the monitor. The room had grown dark without his noticing, the sun's light completely blocked by the heavy clouds. Ben pushed back his chair and went to the window, lifting a pile of clothes with his foot to clear a path. He tried turning on the lamp, but the power was still out. The hour was only three in the afternoon, but outside it was quite dark with only the sounds of the howling winds to indicate there was anything alive.

"You okay in there, Ben?"

He turned. "Yeah, Mum. Lost my bloody file."

"Mind your language or I'll knock you senseless," was the retort. "Come and get out the candles from the top shelf. I can't reach."

You haven't been able to look down on people since I was eleven," he said emerging from his room. "Damn that thing, it had to do it just then."

"What did you lose?"

"Damn story." Standing on his toes, he scooped the candles up and knocked about ten of them down on the floor. "I was going to send it to that horror mag. You know, *Blood Dreams*."

"Sounds sick." Joanna had found the candleholder and four intact candles were soon straggled in and lit. Shadows were chased a scant arm's-reach away from the dark shapes of mother and son standing in the quiet kitchen.

Joanna was delving into the icy dark of the fridge, attempting to identify its frozen contents. "Well, we can have something sandwiches," she concluded. Do you remember what your story was about?"

"Yeah. This guy who works for a vampire - you know, helps him during the day and stuff like that. He eats human flesh and the vampire drinks the blood. Well he . . ."

"Not now!"

"You said you wanted to hear it."

"I asked if you remembered it. I don't want to even *see* remember it!"

The power came on about an hour later, to Ben's secret relief. He'd been remembering a bit too much about that story. He went to check the computer and found that, apart from the story, everything else was all right, including the homework he'd stored. "My computer lost it" might be the most modern of excuses, but it was rapidly getting old with teachers.

He went to get a mug of coffee, leaving the machine to thrum contentedly. Half an hour later he returned and was surprised to see text on the screen. "I

was sure I left it blank. You deciding to have problems, huh?" Ben muttered at the terminal. He sat down, cracking both sets of knuckles in a most satisfactory flex, and scanned the text.

It was the story.

Ben rubbed his eyes as his memory did a double take. Had it stored the story after all? No, he'd just checked the directory - checked every last damn byte - it had been lost, shown down the whirling Black Hole of the computer's Lost Property section, never to be reclaimed. He read a few sentences . . . yeah, that was it, all right. Down arrow to the end.

It was only a paragraph, five or six lines, but it was new to him. It carried on directly from the one before it, which had been about Gail visiting the derelict house with some food for the squatter whom she believed was there on his own. She'd gone in and confronted David . . . and then Stephen had appeared from the basement . . .

Ben shook his head, but he could feel his mind already telling him that it was there; he'd written it seconds before the power went and forgotten it. Computers could only respond to instructions. "Garbage in, garbage out," he muttered, saved the file and turned off the machine.

He retrieved his homework the next morning and showed the still-connected paper into his bag. Pausing, he accessed the story file. "I should have printed this last night!" When it came spilling out of the printer, Ben quickly tore the paper into separates and sat down to scan it. He got to that weird paragraph with some relief. Part of his mind had expected it to vanish with the storm.

The story went on. Ben read to the end with a horrid fascination - the same kind, he admitted, that made him read *Blood Dreams* in the first place. This wasn't his story; he didn't know it. He didn't sleep walk, and he knew that even if he did, he couldn't have slept through the buzz of someone typing on the computer . . . or typed at his sleep! Could he?

"Computer motherboard buff goes insane" writes ghoulish factory in sleep," Ben said aloud in a sepulchral tone that had his mother stick her head in and retort, "Will you come quietly, or shall I tell them to bring the strait-jacket?"

During that day Ben considered several options: Dismantle Tinhead. Consult a psychiatrist. Consult a priest. Talk to friends. Talk to his mother. Wipe the story, and pretend the whole thing never happened. He decided to skip all of the above. He submitted *Guardian to Blood Dreams*.

The acceptance letter came a month later, with some smart comments about how a seventeen-year-old boy could have such a ghastly imagination.

That same night Ben sat down at Tinhead. He had resolutely refrained from all fictional efforts by way of Tinhead - and was rather proud of that sentence too. Now, he glanced at the window, half expecting the storm to whip down anew, but the night remained cool and quiet. Then he opened a file and sat looking at the screen for a few minutes before beginning to type.

Andrea had known she had lycanthropy from the age of about twelve or

thirteen. With the coming of her . . . (The teenage male writer paused and wondered what he should call it. Struggling, he continued) . . . cycle, came the bloodlust that wouldn't be denied. Her parents had taught her but now they were dead - prey of the vigilante whom she now sought for a bloody revenge . . .

He stopped. That would give Tuhcad enough to work with - and he would know for sure.

"I'll even put your name on it, too," he promised.

The next morning he got a holy case of the shivers - even though this was the second time. That one paragraph had apparently been enough. What was more, a whole story had been written in half the time it had taken the . . . the whatever to do the first one. This one really made Ben feel rather sick. He wondered then just how much help the entry was going to need after this. He sent *She Wolf to Blood Dreams*. They returned a letter making inquiries about a contract. While Ben was checking through his computer's directory that evening, he found a listing he didn't remember making. He accessed the *Nightwings* file, and found that it was a story.

Or rather, half of one.

There was a boy in a safe house, beneath a storm. So safe, he believed himself. The storm could never enter . . . what rode the winds of the sky had no part in the world of man. But the nightwings could banish the power of electricity as easily as they had once given it - teaching man the secret of taming the wild power surging from the sky. The nightwings rode gloriously in the torrents of wind and rain and darkness. Below them the tamed power abruptly winked out, leaving man's world in darkness. The boy sat in a dark room, cursing the loss of his work as though it was memory itself he had lost. The nightwings became carousal. . . how could this boy be so important? With the power down, they were no longer barred, and they slipped within the mind of the boy, the thing of man. . . and found themselves in a huge, wide realm of brilliance and magic. They found the knowledge of the boy. . . and in the dark well or its centre, they found what had been lost and restored it. They began to learn of man.

He tried to delete it. The text blinked out and returned. Ben stared at it. He'd wondered in the past what he'd do if an alien intelligence contacted him. Something incredibly intelligent and brave, *SO SAFE*.

But storm-things that wrote stories for him? *Horror stories?*

"They are what you like," something in his mind said. "They're what you store on that computer. They could get basic information about people from your high school homework, for Christ's sake. And they learned about literature from half of a grotty little horror story."

He sat on his bed, school was forgotten. At this point, he knew from reading, one always thought of a resident expert that could help one with one's problems. A priest? Oh sure. *I'm Ben Farrell - the kid that got her off bible class because they didn't know what to do with the non-Catholic, non-Protestant, non-practising atheist. And they didn't like the crack about not needing to practice because I was already very good at it.*

"Viva Quetta Crisp," Ben said aloud. He couldn't go to a computer friend, that was damn sure. *My computer's writing stories for me. The smart answers would be quick and deadly. Oh sure, miss fiddles my tax returns. I'm thinking of giving it a raise. "Okay," he said aloud, "no I go to a non-expert."*

"You go to school!" Joanna's voice came threateningly from the corridor. "Or else you'll end up like your dad."

"The head of a big business corporation? I could do worse."

"The man's mind is a moral sewer," she said sternly. "And he had had breath. I hope he sodomizes his girlfriend. Move it, Ben!"

He moved. The clear cold breeze chilled him but made it easier to think. There really wasn't much choosing to do. He could count friends on one hand - and have the thumb left over. Being liked had never been of high enough priority to make him go to the trouble of socializing. His friends were either those at school - whom it was no effort to make - or accidental.

He climbed over the garden wall to call on the accidental half of his friends. They had not mowed their lawn for about a year, and Ben was soon soaked as he ploughed through the wilderness to the front door. It was opened by a man wearing black jeans and sweater.

"Hi, Audrey," said Ben. "Intruder detector didn't work."

The figure waved a hand at him which he took to mean 'come in'. He stood in the foyer while the figure rushed off, returning with a towel to wipe off his white frothy beard.

"Want coffee, Ben?"

"Thanks."

He was dying off in the kitchen, a large mug of steaming coffee in front of him, when the other member of the household strolled in. Jeff Carter wore the uniform of the public service: grey trousers, blue shirt and grey coat. Ben and Audrey stared at the accompanying scarlet tie in respectful silence.

"Did you eat your breakfast?" Ben asked.

Jeff grinned. "My boss would like to." He sent his briefcase scuttling into the wall. "God, I'm going to be late today."

The fact that neither of them asked him what he was doing out of school was only one of the reasons Ben had chosen to remain friends. Another was that he had almost been dragged on this street when he was thirteen, but the attacker had suddenly turned and fled. When Ben got to his feet, he'd seen a man dressed all in black standing on the garden wall, a huge scimitar in his hands. Ben had been ready to run himself, but the figure called, "Can you take this sword down? I think I will skewer myself if I jump with it." The words had been spoken with a pronounced Russian accent, banishing the naive impression and making Ben laugh with relief. He'd met Jeff soon after - in the house. Audrey had solemnly said that Jeff tended to overcompensate for a boring job, and he for boring unemployment. They'd been friends since Audrey, once a junior clerk for the Russian embassy, got diplomatic asylum two years before.

"I got to show you something," Ben said doggedly and retrieved the copies of the stories - all two and a half of them. "Can you read these? They're pretty short."

Jeff got *Guardians* and *Andrey the Wolf*. They then swapped, their expressions becoming gradually more repulsed. At least Jeff's did; you could only tell it with *Andrey* because he seemed to get calmer by the minute. "Shit," Jeff summarized. "What's the other thing?"

Ben silently handed it to him.

Jeff scanned it quickly. "Well, that's a bit less gruesome than those other Yours, are they? What do you want, criticism?"

"Not exactly. They got published."

"They did, huh? Congratulations. What was it, *Forgotten*?"

"Just about. *Blood Dreams*. They're based in Sydney."

Jeff raised one eyebrow – a neat trick, Ben thought enviously. "Then what's your problem?"

"I didn't write them." *Andrey* looked up and seemed about to speak, but Ben pushed on. "I wrote part of this one . . . up to here. This one, just a paragraph. This *Nightwings* piece – not any of it. And they're not plagiarism and they're not from any book."

"So?" *Andrey* asked.

"My . . . my computer. A couple of months ago . . . remember that storm? Well, I was working on this first one . . . up to here. This one, just a paragraph."

He told it straight out, trying to imagine he was talking to a tape recorder.

"Do you think someone's trying to tell you something?" Jeff asked him when he was done.

"I am going to stop reading these things."

"That is probably too late," *Andrey* said very precisely. Jeff glanced at his watch and cursed. He yanked off the lurid scarlet tie and threw it on to the back of a chair where it lay like a streak of blood.

"I'm sick today," he decided, and wandered out. They heard him dialling in the hallway. *Andrey* picked up *Nightwings* and read it very slowly and carefully.

"You must answer," he said.

"How? And how can you just sit there . . . and not freak?"

"You think you are the first person to whom something strange has happened?" *Andrey* asked. His eyes were a light, intense hazel under fine black eyebrows as he regarded Ben, unblinking. Jeff entered in time to hear this.

"No, I guess I'm not."

"When can we visit this computer?"

"From now until five. My mother'll be back from work then."

"Well, we've got eight hours," Jeff pointed out. "A productive working day, including breaks – at least, that's what the Public Serpents think."

Ben's visitors carried dining-room chairs into his room, and squeezed them in on either side of the chair already there. In some trepidation Ben turned it on, half believing it would be perfectly normal while there were witnesses. He accessed the *Nightwings* file and scrolled the text up to the point it had reached when he'd printed it.

It continued.

They found the knowledge of the box . . . and in the dark well at its centre, they found what had been lost and restored it. They began to learn of men

. . . as man began to learn of them. The dark secret was now shared among three, and the nightwings feared for their safety . . .

"Why?" Ben burst out.

"You tried to delete them, didn't you?" Jeff asked.

"But how was I supposed to know?"

"How were they?" *Andrey* asked. "All they know of you is what you have on the computer, correct? What is that?"

"I'll show you," Ben said. He put the directory up on the screen. "All the files on this machine are there," he said. "The big one's part of my science project. Those ones are all stories, they're the only fiction. The rest of it is homework and a list of books."

"What are these stories?" *Andrey* asked.

"I know," Ben said grimly. "I already thought of that. They're horror, or horror/science fiction. None of 'em got published, though – till the *Nightwings* started helping. And I know what you're thinking: all they know about human society is from my homework and those stories."

"You reckon this is the only computer that ever got visited?" Jeff demanded, uttering precariously on the chair. "Hell, I bet half the schizos – crazy people – had their minds taken over. And I've seen a lot of screwball computers. A lot of screwball programmers too," he added as an afterthought.

"Tell it that you will credit the stories to it alone," *Andrey* told Ben. "You can tell the magazine you have decided to use a pen-name. That . . . that your mother is objecting to her son's name in a horror magazine. Make it sound silly, what does it matter?"

"Worth a try," Jeff agreed. "What name, though? *Nightwings* sounds like some kind of fairy-tale princess . . ." He checked Ben's swipe, chuckling.

"You think of something, then," Ben said, then carefully began to type on the end of the *Nightwings* entry.

There was no need for the nightwings to fear. The creations they had experienced were only stories which Men read for amusement, never dreaming of their origin. They might remain or depart as they willed. Knowledge would be provided to them . . .

"What kind of knowledge?"

"I'll get some more floppies from school," Ben said. "Got to tell it something, huh?"

He froze, as the cursor began to move on the screen. "Hell, they're getting braver now," Jeff muttered.

The nightwings were pleased to know this. They had not understood that the stories were fictional aberrations. Now, they would cease to experience them. They . . .

The screen abruptly went dead. Ben muttered a curse and jamped up to turn a light on. "On Chars! What are they going to think now?"

His friends' expressions were not encouraging.

"Does it even matter what they think?" Jeff asked. "What can they do?"

"Mess around my stories . . ." Even to him, it sounded silly. He leaned on an elbow and stared disconsolately at the blank screen. "Makes me want to reset the bloody computer."

"What would that do?" Audrey inquired.

"Oh, wipe everything. It wouldn't remember a thing."

Jeff rocked back on his chair, his anxiety manifesting in nervous movement. Audrey just sat still. "I don't know why, but I think that would be very dangerous."

The lights came on and Ben jumped violently. Jeff's chair fell to the ground, with him on it. Audrey said something in Russian - obviously a curse.

Slowly, Ben reached out and touched the computer back on. The normal information brightened out to the screen. He typed *NIGHTWINGS*.

Text leaped to the screen - strange text. Audrey read over his shoulder. Jeff was still getting himself and the chair back to their feet.

The screen abruptly went dead. Ben muttered a curse and jumped up to turn a light on. Nothing. "Oh Christ! What are they going to think now?"

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Ben could not think of anything to say. Jeff leaned over to read the screen.

"A computer doesn't have any emotions, of course," Ben said calmly. "That's all sci-fi rubbish. It can only respond to what it gets, and it either understands or it doesn't understand, there's no middle ground, no grey . . ." The cursor was flashing. Sporadic post separated by dots kept to the screen . . .

RESET . . . RESET . . . RESET . . . RESET . . . RESET . . . RESET . . . RESET . . .

The storm followed a screaming black flight of cockatoos low over the crouching suburbs. It removed a roof or two, delivered the coup de grace to an awkward leaning tree, boomed through grey-green skies like an invasion force of F-18s and sheared away into the upper sky.

IN THE DARK RUSH

By Terry Dowling

ANTELIM sang and the ship knew. That is what he believed as he crouched in the dim, red corridor, no longer in his pressure suit but wearing his sweater and his precious sapper-pack, and crooned to the living walls.

Castan had told him that the Trellben organism vessel was empty except for the two of them, but Antelmin wanted to be sure. And even as he named the irregular tube-like corridors and searched the strange ribbed chambers, he could not resist singing to the ship.

Because Antelmin was mad (the people at the station had been saying so for months now, the team's psychiatrists had made it official with a clinical name and other fonder words like *brilliant* and *harmless*), he believed above all else that the ship wanted him there, believed that it was pleased and would show him the dreams of space.

Antelmin saw himself as much more than a straggler, of course. He was maybe, a visionary. He had a purpose. He had to know what it was like to be conscious and awake as the living ship jumped into hyperspace. Not in a strapped, drugged and safe, but completely aware. It was a poet's mission, beyond rules, beyond cases.

Frankly, Antelmin believed that he would know God, but he had told no-one that, certainly not the stationers, not those always-pleasant, always-concerned doctors who had asked him to play and stop and complete their tests. As a mystic and a celebrated songsmith and officially quiet, quiet mad, Antelmin believed the living ships were at the very least mystics too. It seemed right to him. And naturally Antelmin wanted to share their communion with space, wanted desperately to achieve apotheosis. It was the basic truth of his plan, and all that he wanted now.

So far his plan had worked perfectly. He had boarded the Trellben at Castle Orbit, midway between Earth and the Moon. The doctors had not even suspected he could - or would - do such a thing. He was their harmless, brilliant musician, after all.

By cutting in the cruise function of the Trell's major remote-program implant, Antelmin had made the ship a rogue. There had been no trouble at all in doing that either, for Castan had been conscious then, on active duty status, wanting to suicide for the past seven hundred years. The two men had made a deal.

Antelmin had promised to murder Castan after the ship sent him off-duty, saving the old but ageless man from the deathless fate of all penalty-solders. Castan, in his 1-4 punishment suit, had given him the instructions for engaging the ship in return.

"Why do you want *Lozo*?" he had asked, his face masked by the ship-skin of the 1-4 suit.

"The Trellbens know what space is," Antelmin told him. "The jump is an epiphany."

"A what?"

"An epiph... a religious revelation. A special knowledge given to man by God."

"God?"

"Yes. I must experience it."

"Even if it kills you?"

"Yes!" Antelm had said hoping that the penalty-sailor - already a ship creature in a sense, an acolyte - would recognize his conviction and reveal some special insight into the spiritual nature of the Trilbens. As with anyone seeking God, for poor, mad Antelm all of life itself had become the search. "It is metempsychosis. At death, the soul migrates into another form. And that's just the beginning!"

Sealed into his ship-skin sheath, Costan had nodded, pretending to understand the young man with the wild hair and the wild eyes, but eager only at the prospect of an easy death for himself.

So, each with his obsession, they had set about keeping their agreement. First, the penalty-sailor had brought life-support to different parts of the vessel so Antelm could remove his pressure suit, then they did what had to be done.

An hour later, the four-thousand-year-old prime Trilben soft-technology organiform freighter, Laric of Antelm, had broken from station and headed out of system at jump acceleration.

When they had completed evasion manoeuvres, and their speed was such that no ship could catch them, Antelm made his search of the different levels to make sure the rest of the penalty crew had been left behind in the lay-aways at Castle Orbit. He searched and he sang.

Then, satisfied that no others were on hand to taint his pilgrimage, he let Costan introduce him to the Trilb. The two men sat before the captain-tree, that splendid lattice glistening with bright nodes and implants, and talked in low voices seated in the sweating red cathedral silence of that special place.

The living ship, Laric, conditioned centuries before by Barbow Tava, the greatest of the soft-technology ship engineers, spoke Antique and had a vocabulary of over ninety-two thousand words.

"You have regarded me," the ship said from its captain-tree. It was merely a comment, without accent.

"My friend, the young musician, wishes to know the dreams of space," Costan said through the ribbed red mask of his living suit, trying to make his words sound momentous and reverent to please Antelm, so the youth would keep his part of the bargain. "Lilo Sima and Bravo in the legends."

"Your friend. I am not an educated ship," Laric said. "I do not know your stories."

"Will you show him anyway? As a favour to me? He can sing you his songs at return."

Laric took time to ponder the request, to run it by its Tava conditioning templates. "Songs. What will you do, Costan?" it said, and the captain-tree shimmered with its affection for the old penalty-sailor. The sixteen nodules on the grid shone with neutral force, fluorescing and twinkling in the rich gloom.

"I am not allowed to die," Costan told the ship. "Antelm has a weapon that will kill this suit and free me to a quick death. I will take that way."

The captain-tree shimmered and pulsed in the folded red silence of the Interface Room.

"I must keep you safe and living," Laric said simply. "I cannot disobey a prime conditioning."

"Yes, I know, Laric," Costan said, and there was a deep fondness in his voice. "You are not to blame. You have not failed me. But Antelm does not have your Tava controls. He has a way. This is my chance!"

"Your chance. I will do my best to show this one space," Laric said. "And in return he will show me his songs - his way of seeing. So I will be a wise ship."

For the next twelve days, as the Trilben built up its speed for jump, Antelm went aft to the stressed area and added a little more death to Costan's body.

It was not easy to take the life of a penalty-sailor. The tarantula-tarantula suit resisted the musician fiercely, sending more and more nervous bolts through Costan's comatose body. But Antelm's sapper-pack misdirected the maintenance threads already lying in it. When the bolts got there, the carrier strands were neutralised and useless. The man began to die.

There was no pain, Costan assured him through the pack's monitor hood, just a growing numbness as the suit lost localized control at one point or another.

It was good that they were able to talk still, Antelm discovered, though the old sailor's consciousness was dimming and the periods of contact were growing further apart. Once, he even tried to raise the subject of metempsychosis again, believing that Costan was already becoming the ship and passing his essence across, but the sailor said nothing.

On most of his visits, Antelm merely checked the sapper adjustments, making sure the T-t suit was feeding on itself rather than ship's energy, then returned to the main salon and the Interface.

Laric was always glad to see him. It enjoyed human company so much and cherished every opportunity to use its conditioning. And this new human, this Antelm, was so intense, so full of power. Laric was locked into its Tava templates and could not know what obsession was, what madness was, but it was learning to love Antelm as much as it had loved Costan and more, as much as it loved all life and sought nothing more than to carry that life safely between the stars.

They discussed many things, always with the same overriding slant to the musician's inquiries. And sometimes Antelm asked some coolly sensible questions, questions which would have started the station doctors.

"How did they do it, Laric?" he said at his simplest. "How did Tava condition you?"

"Tava," Laric said, echoing the name as if intoning a mantra. "Once we bred too widely. The Trilb were the great klags of the dark. The Nobodoi overlords tamed us, killed off almost all our young, made us very few, broke and shared our breeding programs. We were pressed into service to the starfaring races, rewarded with penalty-sailors and the gift of enjoying such

companions. I am content because I do not know any better, Antelme. My memories are tailored down to my task. I . . . am happy!"

And while Loric discovered more about itself through Antelme's questions, Antelme learned things as well. He realized, for instance, that most of his songs were of doubt and uncertainty, a reflection of his own need to have space mean something more. He discovered he had no songs of celebration.

So during one session at the interface, when Loric said, "Sing me that one again", Antelme felt at a loss, unprepared.

But how could he say No? He grabbed his sweater, formed several tentative shapes to loosen his fingers. Then he began the song of despair that the long-lived Trellans could afford to love since it knew nothing of human despair and hope, and how the gulfs of space could erase such things.

In the dark rush
Between here and there,
There is no light
There is no air,
Nowhere.

In the dark rush
Where the midnight grows
The road that comes
Is the road that goes
Nowhere.

It was a bad song, his poorest in a sense, written when he was nineteen, but Antelme sang it with new feeling, aware that it was a hymn now.

When he had finished, the ship was silent. All Antelme could hear was the sad push-pull of the emission spectrator serving the sailor, and the subdued ever-present pulse of the ship-creature's life functions.

How he wished that Castan had waited a few more days. The old penalty-sailor would have eased the time during the drive up to jump, could have told him so much more about these living ships and acted as a fitting priest of the communion — with his seven hundred years of voyaging, of strange destinations, of an even stranger kinship existing inside ship-stuff.

But the old man's death needed time, and Antelme could not have it both ways. They were already beyond Jupiter, angling away from the ecliptic.

Not long now, not long, Antelme realized. And he thought of Castan down in stress storage, sinking into grateful death, and wondered if there would, in fact, be time. What a tragedy if Loric reached jump before the sepper had done its work. Another seven hundred years. And another.

"Again, Antelme," Loric said from the captain's-see. "It means . . . something to me. Sing it again."

Castan died the next day. One of Loric's watch-systems told it that — incredibly — a 1-1 star was about to go, an overloaded mass of conflicting maintenance foils and restorative tissue gone awry. Antelme heard the news and knew that Castan's consciousness was crossing the threshold.

Rather than go down and see what the man had become, Antelme had Loric

rely any final messages to his monitor. But the personality had leaped, and there was only a strange tickling laughter, a final sighing that he hoped was pleasure, and then, even as he listened, the sound of a distant wind, followed by a white noise silence.

"Castan?" Loric said, and the captain-tree trembled and pulsed, savouring the life-flow out of the ship-skin suit that had become the sailor.

And as Antelme watched in astonishment, a new brilliant node appeared on the shimmering lattice in front of him. It grew before his eyes, swelling out at the intersections of two thickening strands, a moist blood-red nodule flashing with the same neural fire as the rest of the wonderful grid.

Did Antelme imagine it, or did a brief sighing sound come from the living net?

"Castan?" he asked of the captain-tree.

"I have him, Antelme," Loric said. "I have him now."

It was too much. Antelme had been as far from what the stationers called madness as ever he was in these recent days, with Loric to talk to and Castan's death to arrange. But this new development only made him succumb once more. This was certain proof, Antelme believed, this transubstantiation of the old sailor's spirit and energy into the ship. Antelme did not consider alternatives he had learned about on the station: the simple reciprocity of the 1-1 arrangement, the closed-system reflexance of the symbiosis, the fact that Loric might be merely using reflexive life-energy returned to itself to extend its mind and meet the challenge of Antelme's unprecedented demands. This extension on the musician's behalf, out of love and the need to know more, was seen differently.

Antelme could not help but see the hand of God at work. He was sure of it. The Trellans knew space for what it was, they were initiates of a holy mystery.

So Antelme tipped back into madness, was confirmed in it. He was far now from the days when he was sane and angry, a child prodigy, and obsessed even then, when he had sensed more than most that there were no hard-technology jump ships available to humans, just the space pine-cones, the scantest space-coral full of passageways and polyp chambers. Hollow space lands, Antelme had called them then, regardless of how willing the vessels were to carry other life between the worlds. He had hated being sleeved away in a stresspod with the other passengers and the poor penalty-sailors, like so much cargo.

His hatred had been from envy then, the doctors had told him, so it was fitting that such envy was passionate reverence now.

Nothing Loric said in their conversations together could persuade the musician to accept the drugs and servo-organic assists of a pod. Antelme was adamant. He would be conscious for the jump.

At first, Loric tried to appeal to the reason that was left in the man, and they would resume their discussions whenever Antelme returned from the chores he had taken upon himself in the way of a penalty-sailor.

Antelme saw these duties as a form of expiation to the ship for having rejected it. There were stowaways in the anterior holds, for instance, hundreds

of the small cone-shaped parasites which fired furiously in the energies of jump and were to have been burned from the ship at Castle Orbit.

Antelim spent hours in his pressure suit, securing the vacuized compartments, dumping the creatures out into space by hand.

This took three days as Laric approached translation velocity and the jump-point. On the twenty-fourth ship's night, when the purging was done, Antelim squatted before the captain-tree for another of their discussions, unswayed and unswayable.

"I have . . . considered," Laric said, his voice slightly different, already touched with imminence frenzy. Jump was a day away. "Your songs are true for you, but speak of . . . go beyond what you can know." The conversations were often broken now, so close to translating. "I cannot take you with me. I cannot show you. For you, Antelim . . . you, Antelim . . . it is a dark mesh, a no-man, no-way, no-place. For me, it is . . . road and destination . . . consummation . . . all in one somehow. It is . . . hard to say. My Tava controls stop my knowing more. Find a pod, Antelim! So you can live! I do not wish to lose you."

But Antelim did not move, did not even perceive that his presence was depressing the space-creature, holding it back from the first stages of the translation ritual. He crouched on the floor of the Interface and felt how the room was charged with the power and tension as Laric psyched off for the change of states. Antelim saw it as approaching apotheosis, as the climb to its god-state.

"I am staying, Lord!" he said to the net.

"I cannot understand . . . what you need me to be," Laric said. "I have tried but I cannot."

Antelim smiled, watching the winking and twinkling nodes, finding patterns that were yantras in the play of light across the net.

Laric tried again. "I am not the God you seek. Space is not the God. Not space, not the Trelbas."

Antelim continued to smile. "That is what you should say, Lord. You are seeing me."

"I am going to fail you, Antelim," Laric said. "I am just a ship. A servant. I serve the traveling races. I have . . . forgotten what else I am, what else I can be. You are making me more than I am."

Antelim smiled and nodded. You are testing me, he thought. You are. This is what epiphany is like, what theophany is concerned with.

And more than ever, he believed that the jump would bring transubstantiation, that in the intense private fire of the crossing between stars, he would reach some transcendent communion with the Trelbas, achieve true metempsychosis.

Laric knew nothing of this. Bewildered in its Tava conditioning, it sought answers that would permit resolution of the unwanted, distracting stresses it felt.

The captain-tree worked to complete the logic of Antelim's need. It ceased canted with ideation. The filigree ran with thought streamers. Antelim saw the seventeen nodes burn with the white light of his holy dream.

"I am staying, Laric!" Antelim shouted. "Take me with you. Make me your penkey-orator through this."

Laric heard the words and sought answers, searched and reviewed his key templates. It realized it could not succeed. It did not have the knowledge — the Tava patterns had taken it away. Laric knew it had failed Captain by deceiving him to live, now it failed this marvellous Antelim by being unable to be his God. Laric was not an educated ship, but it had learnt one thing: not to destroy life's dreams of more than itself.

"I am committed to jump," the ship said in a mixture of passion and despair, "but I shall not abandon you. I shall try to understand . . . what you need. I am rugged, without a set destination, and you are . . . very alien now. But I shall try."

"I know you will, Lord," Antelim cried, and grabbed his weaver. "And I shall be right here, Intercrosser! Right here!" He formed shapes. "I shall sing and meditate and sit by you."

And he played the song which had become the anthem of his transmigration.

At the middle of the final day, Antelim still sang it. As the captain-tree burned with neural light, blazed with synaptic rhythms, he closed his eyes against the blinding white filigree, hunched down over his weaver and sang his thwarted sad song that was now the only hymn, full of love and longing.

At six hours to translation, he went blind in the radiator, blind beyond all seeing by the T-c suits.

At four hours, his skin was burned by the white flame that was jump ventilation, but still he sang. All this was atonement, a cleansing, a purification, a way for the Intercrosser to do its job.

At ten minutes to jump, Antelim was curled up on the floor of the bluing interface, his weaver abandoned, but singing, singing his song, mumbling unheard words in the roar and frenzy of Laric's translation.

At one minute, the ship queued ahead for the jump-point, reached out and opened that most secret door.

At zero-second, Laric jumped, not understanding.

And Antelim died, in ecstasy, never having understood.

And as the room's departing life-energy flooded the captain-tree at points of contact Laric barely sensed in the act of crossing, a new node began to form on the lattice, taking the count to eighteen after so many centuries, the magical eighteen, a number it had forgotten.

Laric fled through the dark, screaming to itself in bliss and fulfillment, spring at last, trailing behind it thousands of fertile eggs, sharp talons of light which dreamed to become probing viable ship cores.

And when the orgasm was over and the Trelbas was in free space once more, it contemplated the large new solitary node on the virginal captain-tree, studied it, savoured it in an act of reverent self-worship.

The last of one eighteen and the first of another.

The node was not quite the God Antelim had wanted, Laric of Antelim realized as it sank back into what was left of its Tava prison, but it shone and it was very, very beautiful.

And briefly, ever so briefly, a song.

5 CIGARETTES AND 2 SNAKES

By Geoffrey Maloney

THIS is the story of Timofish the Dissident, his wife Katya the Temptress, and their once good friend and confidant, myself, Dominik Trey. Dominik Trey the Sacker who one might get mixed up in their problems and loved to regret it.

One afternoon, in the twenty-sixth year of the People's Democratic Revolution, Timofish and I went shopping. Afterwards we decided to catch a taxi back to Timofish's house in Miankiville where he lived with Katya. The week before, the last of the Corporatists had been rooted out of their hiding places and tried and executed. It was pathetic really, seeing those old men and women on TV, still spouting forth their fascist dogmas of corporate power and control, so old-fashioned, so out of date, so ridiculously silly that you could hardly feel sorry for them. Nobody cared when the three judges pronounced their unanimous verdict. There had been no defence lawyer willing to plead their case, and, as is usual in such cases, they were tried without benefit of a jury. But Timofish had confided in me that he felt a little spark of sympathy somewhere, and that perhaps a little mercy could have been shown on account of their age. Which was ridiculous of course, but then Timofish is like that: he has a weak streak in him that makes him a menace to himself and society. And it was this weakness that gave rise to his dissent.

I was only a child when the revolutions began back in twenty-five, too young to appreciate what was happening as one country after another exploded into political turmoil and mass revolution — one political doctrine or another, capitalism or communism, it didn't matter, for this was a true revolution of the people. The people had realized that it was the Corporatists who controlled the world, the Corporatists who controlled their governments, the Corporatists which had to be destroyed. I suppose that they hardly knew what hit them. They were so used to having power, so used to letting their puppet governments take the brunt of the people's criticism, that when the massive strikes and campaigns of civil disobedience began, they virtually collapsed overnight. It was chaos, absolute and glorious chaos — at least, that is how I see about it. All I can remember myself is that people laughed and cried a lot.

I wasn't get sidetracked. I could talk about the revolution for hours — it is such an agreeable topic — but it's all been said before, studied over and over again, analysed down to its most elemental details. History as people knew it before the revolution has virtually ceased to exist. All that was before is past, is quite embarrassing really. It is only the history of the revolution and the consolidation of the decades that followed that is true history, the story of the people of the world and not the story of corporate power in all its insidious forms and disguises.

Anyway, as the taxi was passing the Badokona warehouses, Timofish was busy explaining his afternoon's purchases to me. Wrapped up in newspapers, the two packages sat between us in the back of the taxi. I, as usual, had

bought nothing. I like to be frugal, conspicuous consumption is something that I detest.

"Water flasks," Timofish said pointing to one of his packages. "I think they'll come in handy. They're made from cuts you know." And then he flashed a look at me to see if I squirmed. He knew that I was a vegetarian.

"Cuts?" I said.

"They remove the head," Timofish said, "then curl the backbone and splay out the ribs, dry the skin tight, seal it and waterproof it. Remarkable what we can do these days. Why, before the revolution I bet we never had any such thing!"

"Was that a joke?" I asked myself, and I did squirm then. If it was a joke, then it was a very bad one, but Timofish didn't laugh, and when I said nothing, he chuckled. "It's okay," he said, "you don't have to eat them, just put water in them."

I remained silent, watching the huge, squat warehouse buildings glide past the window of the taxi. Made of heavy, dark stone with huge, flat, bare walls, they seemed to extend for miles. Timofish leaned over close to me and, gazing out the window, he whispered in my ear, "Don't you think somebody should do something with those walls?"

"Like what?" I asked.

Timofish grinned. "Paint things on them," he said still whispering close to my ear. "Paint slogans of the revolution or slogans against the revolution, anything to break up that boring bare space."

"But it's public property," I said. "One individual would have no right to assume that they alone could utilize it. Why, that would be Corporatist. Any individual choosing to paint anything on those walls would, by the very act, be a counter-revolutionary. Timofish, how could you think of such a thing?"

But Timofish said nothing; he just leaned back into the seat and grinned some more. But he kept his silence for only a short while, and when he spoke again, he had changed the subject entirely.

"Katya and I have decided not to sleep together any more," he said.

I caught the words for what they were, different sounds drifting in the ear, but I failed to give them any meaning. I was still lost in the expanse of the warehouse buildings. They had been built during the revolution for the express purpose of housing the confiscated indulgences of the Corporatists. It was said that the buildings were still full of their stuff, thousands of examples of those fiscists' conspicuous consumption. There was talk that the People's Government was planning to open the buildings as a museum, to show the people how disgusting the greed of the Corporatists really was.

"I think it will do us both good, not sleeping together," Timofish said.

I finally gathered his words together, trying to give them some sense.

"Do you mean," I said, "that you won't sleep together in the same bed?"

"No, we'll still sleep together in that sense," he said, "just no sex. We've decided to be celibate."

Yes, well, I sort of shrugged.

"I think it will be a good thing really," Timofish said.

"Don't you like sex any more?" I asked him.

Startled by such a blunt remark, Timofish's head sprang back, his neck becoming erect, then he looked me in the eye.

"What?" he said. "Of course I do, but that's not it, not it at all. It's just that lately I've been feeling really tired – no energy, feeling like I've been suffering major mornis in the mornings. Abstinence is supposed to restore energy, bring back vitality – and not just physical energy either, but psychic energy."

"Timofish," I said, "you're sounding like an old New Age Corporatist." And then I laughed.

"Domini," he said, "this is no joke. Besides, there were some good ideas around in the old days, not all of them were bad."

"And Katya agrees?" I asked.

"Of course," Timofish said. "Of course Katya agrees . . . she herself . . ." but then he hesitated.

"Yes?" I prompted.

Then the whole frame of his body seemed to collapse back into itself. His head sank down between his shoulders.

"God, I'm bored," he sighed. "I'm totally and thoroughly bored. I'm bored with work. I'm bored with Katya; I'm bored with the revolution; I'm bored with everything. Nothing interesting seems to happen any more."

"Maybe you should travel," I suggested. "Go to Africa, see the great wild animals of the world. Thanks to the revolution they're still alive. That'd be exciting. I've often thought of going myself, maybe we could plan to go together."

"It's the same everywhere," Timofish said. "The revolution this, the revolution that, thanks to the revolution and so forth and so on, besides, I hate boats, I get seasick – now if we still had planes . . ."

I looked at Timofish and then at the taxi driver. Had he heard? I hoped Timofish got the message from my looks, but apparently he didn't, for then he began to talk even more like a Corporatist.

"But it's true," he said. "Planes were exciting – think about it – being able to fly! Journeys of weeks cut down to hours. Planes were one of the greatest things that humans had ever invented. I don't know why we ever got rid of them."

"Not everybody could afford to travel by plane," I said, "so we got rid of them. Now we have more ships instead. Not everybody could afford to own a car, so we got rid of private car ownership as well – a good thing too, I much prefer my bike, much healthier from what I've heard. Besides, everyone can afford to catch a taxi every now and then. It's the most fundamental principle of the revolution, if everybody can afford to do it, then we do it, if not, we stuff it. You know that, Timofish."

"I know, Domini, I know, but to think, if you had a car, zipping around here and there. It'd be fun."

"Your grandparents would turn in their graves to hear you talk like this, Tim," I said.

"Oh, yes, my grandparents," he said, "heroes of the revolution. Did you know that they led the onslaught on the Corporation buildings, that they took over the running of the Sydney Morning Herald and turned it into a revolutionary newspaper even before the end of the revolution? Don't tell me about my grandparents; they were great people. But did you also know that they owned two cars – think of that: two cars – talk about conspicuous consumption. And they had the benefits of having lived in exciting times, but those are boring times, nothing new ever happens. Back then, yes, I would have been in that crowd destroying the Corporation buildings, smashing the glass, ripping up the carpet, painting moustaches on the portraits of the old men. It would have been exciting."

"It wasn't supposed to be exciting," I said, then lean over and tapped the taxi driver on the shoulder. "We're getting out here," I said.

"What?" Timofish spluttered. "But we're not even home yet."

"I need a drink," I said. The taxi driver pulled over and I paid him, leaving a generous tip that I hoped would allow him to forget our faces. He smiled so I thought that everything would be okay.

I pushed Timofish out of the taxi and we stood on a corner in Newtown, huddling in our great coats against the winter chill. It was late afternoon. The sky was its usual foreboding grey and getting darker by the minute. To the west a great black thunderhead was rising up. It looked like it would rain before the evening was finished.

I stood there for a few minutes glaring at Timofish. We were about the same height, he and I, and close to the same build. From a distance we could have been mistaken for brothers. We had spent so much time together over the years that people who had only just met us often got us mixed up. People were always calling me Tim instead of Dom. But close up, there was a lot of difference between us. Tim's features were finer, his eyes darker, more mysterious, his lips fuller. People said that he was more handsome, and from my experience of being around him and women, I knew that this was true.

"Well, are we getting that drink or not?" Timofish said.

I nodded my head. Timofish turned and strode down the street towards the nearest bar – *The Gosford*. It served very poor carnic, but its Polish vodka was good. Timofish placed both his packages on the bar, and I ordered two vodkas. *The Gosford* was still quite empty, the usual university crowd not yet having left their libraries and offices to gravitate up King street to the cheap bars and restaurants.

"What's in the other package?" I asked Timofish trying to talk about something else, trying to calm my rising temper. Timofish looked at the package as if weighing something up.

"Nothing," he finally said, "just some spray paint. I need to fix Katya's bike up; it's got a bit of rust."

I thought nothing of that. I took a sip of vodka and realised that I could keep calm no longer. "That was a bloody stupid thing you did back there," I said, "talking like that; how do you know that the taxi driver wasn't a BOSS agent?" Somebody once told me that all taxi drivers are BOSS agents. They find out heaps that way."

Timofish laughed. "That somebody was me and I made it up. It was a little nervous that I was fond of spreading. It seemed like a fun idea."

"Jesus, Timofish, you're acting like an asshole, a dunderhead even. Excitement for excitement's sake. If I didn't know you better, I'd say that you were a Corporationalist at heart."

"You're so fucking boring sometimes, Dorian," Timofish said.

"Me, boring?" I said. "You're the one who's so fucking bored, you're the one who wants the rest of the world to starve so you can fly around in planes and drive fancy cars."

"I'm leaving," Timofish said. Grabbing his parcels, he swung off the bar stool and fell straight into me. He dropped his parcels and grabbed at my coat for balance. I steadied him, then bent to pick up his parcels.

"Leave it," he said. "Leave them alone, just leave me alone."

He picked up his parcels by himself, then stormed off towards the door. "And what about Katya?" I called out.

He turned around, his face obviously flushed. "Fuck Katya," he said. "Fuck you. Fuck the revolution," and then he was gone.

I sat down at the bar again. "He's mad," I said to the barman, but the barman said nothing and just gave me another Polish vodka. I drank it down quickly and ordered another one. Timofish was heading for trouble, I could tell that. If he wasn't careful, people would start to pay attention to what he was saying. Some would laugh, others would think "Oh, poor Timofish", but others would not, and before he knew it, BOSS would be on his tail, and at the rate he was going, he was likely to be arrested and that would be the end of it. But he wasn't really a Corporationalist - I had just said that to try and get him to take things more seriously. They wouldn't execute him, but he'd disappear for several years at least, to re-emerge burnt-out, even more apathetic about things than he was now. If he was bored now, he'd be boring then, and the big difference would be that he wouldn't care any more.

You will notice that I have not agreed with anything that Timofish has said. I do not agree now and I will never agree. There are limitations to the world that we live in, but balance those limitations out - and if you are a real human being and not a Corporationalist - you'll take the bad with the good, work within those limitations and you can be happy. Would you, as any normal human being, prefer to be catching planes all over the world and driving your own private car, knowing that people in Africa starve to death so that you can do that; or would you prefer to travel by ship and catch a bus or ride a bicycle, with nobody starving, with nobody living in abject poverty, with everybody having the same choices that you do? *No Consciousness Consciousness, No Guilt* was one of the early slogans of the revolution, and it is still appropriate because it is true. (BOSS, are you listening to this?) Yet, the Corporationalists argue that you can only achieve progress through inequality, which doesn't matter to them because they fully believe - indeed they have to, to assuage their guilt - that some people are more unequal than others. Is that what Timofish had been talking about? Is this what he meant? No, I don't think so, not really. Timofish's problem was a psychological one, not a political one; he was just bored and incapable of doing anything about it.

I drank another vodka, and another, and thought about Timofish, then I thought about Katya and decided to phone her up. Why not? I asked myself, after all, Timofish needed help; perhaps she and I could collaborate. So this is what I said to myself, but I knew that I was lying, well, not selling myself the whole truth anyway. I did want to help Timofish, I didn't want him to fall into the clutches of BOSS, but I also wanted to see Katya.

Timofish had met Katya when she was sixteen, at a party in Melbourne, but I had met her earlier, ten minutes earlier than he did, in fact. We had been down in Melbourne for the weekend to attend an Australian Students' Union conference. Both of us had been at university then, and both of us had been elected to the National Students' Representative Council. Timofish was studying international politics and I was doing history. Both were serious revolutionary subjects, but Timofish had the glamour field as usual. Katya had attended the conference as the representative of her high school. I hadn't noticed her at the conference, but afterwards at the party I saw her, a short woman with dark hair, white skin and blue eyes and wearing a short red silk dress. I thought that she was the most beautiful woman that I had ever seen, but Timofish - dark and handsome Timofish - had said, after sleeping with her, that he thought her quite ordinary.

At the party I had gone up to Katya and introduced myself, told her that I was studying history and asked her about herself. That was when Timofish had come up. I saw Katya's pupils grow wide. Timofish dazzled her - international politics and all that. He told her about his grandparents - who wouldn't be impressed? Later that night I saw them leaving together, arm in arm. Timofish and Katya. Timofish, I am sure, had planned on a one night stand, for that was his style back at those days, but he hadn't reckoned with Katya. Ten years later they were still living together, and ten years later - despite the bitterness I felt that night - Timofish, Katya and I were still good friends.

So, I sat at the phone at the bar pushing the little squares of Katya's phone number. The phone rang and rang while the continuous electronic drone of the latest House hit shuffled and thumped in the background. I gazed along the length of the bar and noticed a young man with a stylish skubra bar arguing with the barman. The phone stopped ringing and Katya's voice came on the line. She sounded sleepy, spacey even, but when I suggested that I might drop around, she seemed to brighten up, even sounded eager for me to come. Timofish? She had no idea where Timofish was. I put the phone down and ordered one more vodka, drank it down in one shot and left the bar.

At the bus stop I noticed the same young man who had been arguing in the bar; and when the Marrickville bus pulled up, he got on as well, sitting several seats up from me with his hat pulled rather self-consciously down over his eyes. When I got off, he clambered down the steps behind me. A coincidence perhaps, but a little knot began to form in my stomach. Perhaps I hadn't left the taxi driver a big enough tip? When I turned into Katya's street, he turned as well and crossed to the other side of the road. I stopped in front of a house, waiting him. He stopped and looked over at me. The knot in my stomach tightened, and I felt weak at the knees. BOSS isn't particularly

concerned about being inconspicuous, they like you to know that you are in trouble. So we continued on down the street, and when I got to Katiya's gate, he stopped and leaned against a lamp post whose light wasn't working - a token gesture to his undercover role.

Katiya greeted me at the door, ten years older than when I had first met her, but to my eyes more beautiful than ever. Her hair was newly cut in a short, shaggy bob, so dark brown that it was almost black. She wore a black leather bra-top and a short iridescent green skirt - old fashioned and punky, the way Katiya always liked to dress. Her lips were painted red, bright red, scarlet, but her blue eyes had lost the sparkle that I always remembered. They were dull and opaque, the whites slightly pinkish but not quite bloodshot. I guessed that she had been taking drugs - marijuana most likely. There were certainly worse things around, but still I feared that it might make her withdrawn, difficult to talk to.

But I was wrong. Katiya smiled, welcomed me, rubbed me with her handsomeness and gentleness, offered me a drink: Polish vodka? Yes, of course, Polish vodka.

I sat in the lounge-room on the fake zebra skin couch that used to belong to Timofish's grandparents.

Katiya handed me the vodka in a plastic cup, then walked over to the Jap ghetto-blower, and bending from the waist, leaned over to slip the latest House mix into the tape-deck. Her skirt moved up the backs of her legs, riding up high towards the tops of her thighs. The universal woman I thought, plucking the universal music on the universal music machine - and there was nothing boring about it. This was the revolution. This was my time, everyone's time. Bored? What was Timofish on about? Just sitting there, sipping the Polish vodka, listening to the music and watching Katiya, made me feel so warm and happy inside that, for a moment, I even forgot about the man from BOSS who was loitering outside.

Katiya turned and flashed a look at me with her dull eyes. "So, Dom, what's the problem?" she asked. Whatever she had taken obviously hadn't dulled her perception.

I shrugged. "Timofish," I said. "Where is he?"

"Out," she said.

"Out where?"

"Out where?" Katiya said sighing, "I don't know where. He always goes out."

"I saw him this afternoon," I said. "We had an argument. He stormed off. What's wrong with him?"

Katiya said nothing and just leaned back against the lounge chair and sipped her vodka. "I really like this House track," she said. "It almost makes me feel like dancing."

"He told me he was bored," I said, "that he wanted to fly in planes, that he wanted to own his own car, and other crazy things as well. If I didn't know him better, I'd say he was becoming a dissident, maybe even a Corporatist."

Katiya laughed. "Oh, Dom," she said, "you're such a perfect child of the revolution."

"It's all we've got," I said. "If it wasn't for the revolution, people like you and I and Timofish would have nothing. Timofish is in trouble and I want to help him."

"You know," Katiya said, "he said to me the other day, 'I dream about cigarettes, Kate - not marijuana, but real cigarettes. Tobacco. I'd like to smoke five cigarettes, not just one, because one wouldn't be good enough, but five, because after five you'd be sick of them, they'd become boring.' And he said, 'remember when we were kids, those lilies you used to be able to get - funny little jellied snakes; just two of them would be fine. One for me and one for you. Well, maybe three - Domini might like one as well.'"

Katiya smiled at me, and I guessed that Timofish hadn't really said that last bit, but I could not smile back. Timofish's tastes were becoming dangerous.

"Cigarettes give you cancer," I said. "We had to get rid of them, besides, all the tobacco companies were controlled by the Corporatists, they had to go."

"But, Dom, that's not the point," Katiya said.

"Well, what is the point, Katiya? Don't you think that Timofish has been acting strange? All this talk about planes, cars, cigarettes and jellied snakes; it's weird, not quite sane. I think Timofish has a psychological problem. Katiya, I think he needs professional help."

"He doesn't really want those things. They're just symbolic, nostalgic. He seems to think that things were better before the revolution, that they were more exciting, that people had more freedom, more choices."

So there it was, Katiya had said it. Timofish believed that things were better before the revolution. He really had become a dissident. His psychological problem had become a political one. It would be the West Australian Reconstruction Camps for him for sure. I hoped that BOSS hadn't bugged the house yet.

"Things were not better," I said. "Some people had a lot more, others a lot less. It wasn't right, it wasn't good."

"No, it wasn't good, Domini," Katiya said. "I don't think Timofish really meant that. I think he just meant that it was more interesting then, that nothing really interesting happens any more. He yearns for something interesting to happen, something . . ."

"But there is something interesting happening," I said. "And it certainly isn't good."

Katiya looked up at me. Her eyes seemed to have a little more life in them now. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"Come with me," I said.

I stood up and led her to the front room of the house.

"Draw the curtains aside, carefully," I said, "and tell me what you see."

Katiya peered out the small gap she had made between the curtain and the window frame. "There's a man standing across the street," she said. "He appears to be studying the house."

"BOSS," I said. "Now don't you think that's interesting?"

Katya said nothing. She let the curtain fall back into place. I felt a lump rise in my throat. It quivered there for a moment before becoming harder.

"Timofish told me you've stopped having sex," I said.

Katya drew the curtains aside once more and looked back out into the street. "What do you think he wants?" she asked.

I was standing near the doorway, at least five or six feet away from Katya, but I could feel the heat flowing out from her body. I took a step forward, then another, until I stood directly behind her. My fingers trembled as my hands moved towards the silver studs at the back of her black leather bra. I unclipped the studs and let the straps fall apart. I touched the skin of her back, moved my hands around and up underneath until they were clutching the softness of her breasts. Katya pushed her body back into mine.

"Don," she said, "go and ask him what he wants."

I closed my hands away from Katya's breasts and went and opened the front door. Full of confidence I strode out the gate and across the street.

"Listen you," I said, "just what do you think you're doing?"

Unruffled, he moved out of the darkness, dug his hands into the pockets of his great coat and attempted the steely-eye gaze that all BOSS men are famous for. I burst out laughing.

"What's your name?" he asked.

Challenged, some of my bravado disappeared. I reached into my pocket for my ID card and found that the little wallet that held it was missing. I was seized by a momentary panic. My hands quickly searched through my remaining pockets, but no, it was definitely gone. I composed myself, realising that I'd have to bluff it out. Then a thought sprang to mind, and I allowed a faint smile to form on my lips. It was Timofish who'd got me into this mess, and it would be Timofish who got me out of it.

The agent took a step towards me. "C'mon, what's your name? Out with it."

"Timofish McFarlane," I said, "and my grandparents helped create the revolution in this country before you were even a lump in your mother's belly. So fuck off asshole."

I turned and walked back into Katya's house. Katya still stood near the window, and I saw that her bra had fallen to the floor. "He's gone," she said, and I smiled as she began to unhook her skirt.

On the way home that morning, the two passed the Buddicon warehouses once more, and there, written in spray paint on well after wall, was the slogan:
5 CIGARETTES AND 2 SNAKES! WHAT PRICE THE REVOLUTION?

I smiled to myself. It was obviously the work of a madman; Timofish had gone off the rails. He would get two years for this at least, and he only had himself to blame. Later that morning I read in the early Herald that two water flasks had been thrown at visiting dignitaries from Southern Africa covering them in green paint, the colour of the revolution. A can of spray paint and an ID card had been found nearby. Fifteen minutes later BOSS appeared on my doorstep. The ID card had been mine. No arguments were any good.

Timofish McFarlane had spent the entire evening at home with his wife Katya - she, of course, verified this. There was even a BOSS agent who had spoken to him. And, as was usual in such cases, there had been no defense lawyer willing to plead my case.

I spent two years in a Reconstruction Camp in Western Australia, but it wasn't so bad really. After all, Katya had been the love of my life, and my memories of that one night with her nourished me during my time at the camp. What more can I say? There has been a mistake, Timofish McFarlane stole my ID card, Timofish McFarlane is the dissident. It is old news now. No-one is listening. Such mistakes are the price of the revolution. It is worth the cost.

AUSTRALIA'S GRAND MASTER AN INTERVIEW WITH GEORGE TURNER

By Dirk Strasser



He's been called the Grand Master of Australian science fiction. He's 74, and he's at the top of his form. Dirk Strasser speaks to novelist George Turner.

IT'S strange that Australia's most revered science fiction writer doesn't read much science fiction nowadays. "I feel it's bad for me," he says. "I get bad tempered."

The books which take pride of place on the shelves in George Turner's inner suburban Melbourne flat are the classics, Dostoyevsky rather than DeLany, More rather than Moorcock. The great science fiction novelists are for him in the past: H. G. Wells, Aldous Huxley and Olaf Stapledon.

He says that very few writers these days are writing novels rather than adventure stories. Most of the modern crop of writers — and he includes mainstream as well as science fiction writers — aren't tackling the big themes. Science fiction should be at the forefront of such endeavours, but it isn't. "There's no sign in all of science fiction that the human race is at the present on the edge of the biggest changes that have ever occurred to it since it started." Not only are science fiction writers no longer searching for the answers, they've even stopped asking the questions.

It was the scope science fiction offered for the exploration of ideas that attracted George Turner to the genre. "You start with an ordinary idea and open it up to see where it really goes if you sit down and think about it for a while." While most modern science fiction writers are weaving tales of far futures and parallel universes, George Turner's concern is the near future of overpopulation, the collapse of the monetary system, and the Greenhouse effect.

Although he agrees that conservation is one of the important issues of our time, he sees the real problems of the present day as "people" — 95 million more of them every year. "Work that out on compound interest," he says, "and you will double the population of this planet in forty years. Ten billion people to be fed on a planet that can't feed five at the moment."

But George Turner isn't one to simply sit back and lament the current state of science fiction. In his autobiography, *In the Heart or on the Head*, he called for a new breed of science fiction writer, a science fiction writer that does not deal with comfortable ideas and painless solutions. With *The Sea and Sorrow*, his most highly acclaimed novel to date, he has answered his own call and has led the way for the new breed.

He chooses *The Sea and Sorrow* as "far and away his most satisfying work". It has gained world wide critical acclaim: winning the Arthur C. Clarke Award and the Commonwealth Literary Award in London, one of the John W. Campbell Jar Awards in America, as well as being one of the finalists in the prestigious Nebula Awards. His popularity is now at an all time high, with good sales in America, translation into three languages and an Australian television mini series in the planning stages.

George Turner doesn't deal with comfortable ideas in *The Sea and Sorrow*. His Greenhouse Melbourne couldn't be further away from the future societies depicted in most current science fiction: "societies exactly the same as now, only with more gadgets." The Greenhouse effect has left its indelible mark on Twenty-First Century Melbourne. He has taken his views of the inevitable world monetary collapse to their logical conclusion: the further stratification of the haves and have-nots into the totally different economic system of *Sweet and Sorrow*. It's not a pleasant world, characters are motivated by the necessity of their circumstances, but it is very real and frighteningly imminent.

While *The Sea and Sorrow* has surpassed the sales figures of his previous novels and has further enhanced his claim to the crown of Australia's greatest science fiction writer, George Turner, even at the age of 74, has no desire to reduce his workload. He has another novel, *Nursery Games*, currently being considered by an American publisher and is half way through yet another novel, still untitled.

Though *Nursery Games* is set at about the same period as *The Sea and Sorrow*, it is an entirely different Greenhouse world, a milder one: in which he uses new information that has been discovered about the Greenhouse effect since writing the other novel.

In his latest, incomplete novel George Turner again starts with an idea and opens it up "to see where it really goes". This time the theme is overpopulation and the consequences of reducing the birth rate. He explores the psychological

backlash of an entire planet being prevented from having children. "What happens to the family?" he asks. "The family is the major responsibility that holds everything together, and if that responsibility is out the window, then what happens to any kind of personal morality? I think we would be in a state of barbarism fairly soon."

His desire to explore ideas thoroughly makes it difficult for him to write shorter works. That is why the recent collection of his short fiction, *A Parade of Miracles* (Aplacon Publications), is his first. His short stories tend to "burst into monsters" and many of the ones in this collection are obviously seeds for much longer works. *The Sea and Summer* had its genesis in the shorter work "The Pitiless," and another story in the collection, "On the Nursery Floor," was a precursor to *Nursery Games*. Who knows what monster his new story, "I Still Call Australia Home," published in this issue of *Asiatica*, will eventually evolve into?

In this latest story George Turner once again shows the essential quality he has brought to contemporary Australian science fiction, and the reason he has been so influential – his *Australianness*. Unlike many other Australian science fiction writers, he makes no attempt to ape American models (we shouldn't "give in to them," he says), nor are they set in a vague never-land. "I Still Call Australia Home" takes place in a future Australia and is, like so much of his work, specifically set in Melbourne. "I use Melbourne because I'm a Melbournean," he says, "always have been."

George Turner is at his most passionate when talking about the uniquely Australian element of science fiction. You can see it in his eyes – not an overacted, hot-headed passion, but a passion nonetheless. There is the same pride when he writes in his autobiography of the possibility that he has an Aboriginal ancestor. His fiction is deeply rooted in his environment, his *Australianness* is not a superficial gloss spread over a standard plot, it is essential and all-pervasive. "*Australianness*," he says, "is not a matter of familiar names and places – and mentioning wallabies and kangaroos and Ayers Rock doesn't get you anywhere either. It's the sound of the prose. The English speak like Englishmen, the Americans like Americans – and Australians speak like Australians. *Australianness* is an attitude of mind. We think differently about things, we react differently to things."

George Turner has always been a strong advocate of our local science fiction, and his opinions carry a great deal of weight. He considers Peter Carey's early stories to be the "best short science fiction that's ever been written in this country". However, we have to look further back into the past for the best Australian science fiction novel. According to him, it is *Tomorrow and Tomorrow* by M. Bernard Eldershaw (actually Marjorie Bernard and Flora Eldershaw), published in 1947.

Of the writers currently producing science fiction, he considers Damien Broderick as "in a technical sense, probably the best writer among all of us," but adds that he is yet to come up with a theme really suited to his talents. "The big theme comes to you perhaps once in a lifetime," he says. "For me it was *The Sea and Summer*." He suggests that, while Terry Dowling "is a

good stylist (and God knows we can do with them because we've got very few)," he is also still searching for his big theme.

Whereas George Turner readily admits to being "a sucker for special effects" in American science fiction movies, he is scathing in his criticism of the popular imaginative writing currently being published in America. "Ninety percent of science fiction is just plain thrillers. Why should we deny it?" he asks. "If people want thrillers with a fantasy background, okay, let them have them, but let's not pretend that they're intelligent."

It is this "pretence of intelligence" that gets under his skin in, for example, William Gibson's *Neuromancer*: "Cyberpunk carryings-on in a world that isn't even decently disguised and certainly isn't explained, a world that simply could not exist." But, he saves his most blunt comments for the horror novels of Stephen King and Peter Straub. "They are a pack of rubbish," he says. "Horror writing bores me to tears. It just doesn't interest me. Perhaps it's because I'm too old, and I've been reading too long."

George Turner has, in his own words, always "pleased himself" as far as his writing is concerned. "There are two kinds of science fiction writers really," he says, "there are those who have something to write about, and there are those who like the money. The money is not hard to get. You've only got to read what was written last month and change the names of the characters." While most science fiction writers are doing little more than "committing incest with each other", it has taken Australia's Grand Master to show the way into the next century.

DO WE LOVE?

By Dianne M. Speter

1.

THIS was the device they'd waited for. A mechanism which could tell if someone was really in love. Imagine: A lover declares their passionate devotion to you, and you ask them to merely slip the headset on, and by a simple monitoring system, the presence of true love can be detected. Bogus claims and exaggerations in relationships could be minimized. Before you buy the love of your life those expensive gifts and lavish on them all your affection, you can test if they're worth it, if they really do love you.

The love culers will, of course, hate it. Business will plummet, devotions will be demoralized and discouraged from spending a month's wage on love arousal therapy if the results of the love testing mechanism don't measure up to the culers' promises. They're calling the machine the *LTZ Zeev*. No-one knows why. Not only does the *LTZ* detect if someone is in love, it also allows a second party to attach a device to their own body and discover whether they are the person with whom the lover is besotted. Thus, husbands, wives, girlfriends and boyfriends may learn if they are the lovers or wanners in the complex maze of who loves who. Devotions will skyrocket some say. After all, it's unsettling to learn that the person you've idolized for fifteen years doesn't love you. You have proof. Unfounded suspicion in this realm will become an obsolete emotion. You will know.

2.

Elena surveyed the morning's news readout and sighed. The *LTZ Zeev* was here. Would she be subjected to the indignity of placing the awkward and hostile looking headset on while Jake monitored her inmost feelings? She could refuse, of course. No-one could make you put those stings on. Civil liberties and privacy were still a reality. But if you refused, were you not already supplying a terrible answer to the one who doubted your sincerity? Perhaps you could utilize inoffensive logic structures and say that for them to doubt you, they were indeed displaying the fissures in their own supposed devotion. But Elena knew that such a plea would fall meaninglessly on Jake's ears, and with a feeling of painful inevitability, she realized the day would come when he would learn the truth.

Within four months the *LTZ* devices were filling two rows of shelves in the Meabbage Supermarket. They were expensive. No one expected otherwise. Blackmarket copies would eventually make their way into the hands of the poorer citizens, but for now the privilege of testing those nearest to you lay in the hands of the rich. Self-testing would, of course, develop into a rather pathetic form of entertainment. In the privacy of your own home, you could discover the intensity of your feelings. So, it's only infatuation you realize. Oh well, it may change. Never still is to find it's more. It's real. You've

transcended the faking barrier and become one of the privileged deep feelers. To discover your love may be only lost after all might sudden a few checks and unnerve the overly romantic, but at least you were no longer deluded.

Elena relaxed in the backyard of the tiny but comfortable house she and Jake shared. It was her birthday. Twenty-five. Secure and reasonably well off. She felt uneasy. Married for two years. Immediately after graduation she had met Jake. He worked as an Environmental Planner, she as a Soil Conservatorist. They commenced seeing each other regularly soon after their first meeting. Within a year they were married.

She had had doubts at first. Marriage had seemed so restrictive and consuming. But somehow, like thousands of other young people, she had signed and entered the new phase of her life with an air of stupefied amazement, curiosity, fear and love. Yes, she did love Jake then. She wondered if the *LTZ* would have agreed had it been there to verify her feelings. For love culers, no doubt, an obligatory testing would have been a prerequisite to the marriage ceremony. But for the average lonely person, love was sometimes a side benefit, not a necessity. A hand to hold, a caring look. Earth in 2005 was not dissimilar to previous centuries in terms of human emotions. Loneliness killed just as relentlessly, and publications on "how to be loved" always sold well. But Elena did not love now.

She leaned back, closing her eyes as the sun fell with the mildness of autumn upon her face. A shadow soon replaced the warmth, and she opened her eyes to see Jake standing before her, his arms behind her back.

"You certainly slept in," she remarked lazily.

"Sorry, my love," he replied with an air of regret. "Happy Birthday."

He brought his arms forward and presented Elena with a small, beautifully wrapped parcel. Its elegant paper and artistically arranged ribbon made her smile. He was special. Such care. How many men . . . but she thought stopped, and her fingers uncoiled the bow and removed the paper to disclose a small box. Within was a necklace. A very fine gold chain supporting a seahorse, also of gold and delicately textured. Their mutual love of the sea, their concern about the pollution of the oceans was in the gift. Elena rose to her feet and hugged Jake tenderly.

"And that's not all," he whispered as her head fell upon his neck. "The rest is inside." She withdrew her arms from the embrace, and her right hand fell automatically into his left palm as they walked towards the back door.

It stood on the table, without wrapping, without adornment of any kind. And she needed not to be told what it was. The *LTZ* had arrived.

"Well?" Jake questioned, obviously excited. "Do you know what it is?"

"Yes, I think I do."

"Happy birthday, honey." He leaned forward and kissed her, and then eased her toward the table.

"It won't bite," he laughed.

What was hidden behind that laugh, Elena wondered. Was this a malicious game, a joke, or a well planned and final assault on what secrets she still retained from him?

"Do they really work?" she asked, her eyes downward and her fingers moving on the gold seashore which now rested on her throat.

"Of course. No doubt about it. Treat had one at the office and, by God, it made a few faces red."

Jake smiled, but she saw beyond it. She saw the agony of doubt wrenching his gut, narrowing his eyes. The suspicions which probably visited every partner had, for some reason, permanently lodged in his soul, and he was not to be denied this final triumph — the exposure of his wife. Why the fierce, the act of the generous, boyish husband? Why the scumble smile?

"Cost me enough," he added with a grin. "It's just as well you work too! Let's try it out."

"Lurch first," Elena turned with a wry smile, tapping him on the chin and regarding her composure like a true professional. He consented and they walked to the kitchen. And then their tension game began in earnest. He set the table with impeccable style, moving the LZZ to a sideboard where it dominated small ornaments and photographs like some mechanical God. Elena went to the garden and collected some fresh herbs, then she prepared a salad to accompany the small vegetable rolls she'd baked the day before. She watched Jake as he poured out wine and earned the glasses carefully to the table. They ate their meal slowly, the image of the LZZ protruding with a vulgar regularity into their conversation. Elena surveyed the machine, and then her mind closed off to the meal and to the present time as she suddenly remembered. Was it so recently?

She recalled the leaves falling and the saltiness of the air as it licked her face. There was a huge park, cherished by those who had watched the 20th Century destroy what life it could. Beyond the park was the sea. An expanse that nothing could equal. A world of constant movement, constant change, an enigmatic blue world which was always there to touch the hearts of those who came to its shores. Elena was on the rocks, moving with steady steps towards the rock pools and tiny coves which held the small creatures which belonged both to land and sea — who were like herself. And there behind her, closer to the land, stood Jake. He was bending over and examining something on the ground, and his fair hair glimmered intensely and made him truly resemble a child of the sun. How beautiful, she had thought. It was a year since they had married. So short a time, so much discovered. She looked at his beauty, but knew she did not love him as before. She did not love. How she had feared the possibility. He had looked up and noticed her examining him, and he had held up his hand and waved as if he had witnessed nothing. But they both knew something had changed.

The sea then enclosed her, and she saw seashores dancing and tiny fish weaving between her fingers as her dark hair spiraled out into the water in a fine buoyant mesh. Darker forms moved in shadows further out in the water; but her guardians, the seashores, would protect her. Then a great wave crashed above them and the seashores swam off, startled.

"Nice wine," Jake commented quietly. He left the table on the promise of fetching more of the sweet liquid, but returned instead bearing a cake. "Surprise!" he said, and a coffee-colored creation covered with swirls of fine

chocolate was placed before Elena. Five candles were aflame upon it, and she blew them out with a soft breath.

"It's lovely," she said, her eyes on the cake, not Jake's face. He walked back to the kitchen and it returned with plates, spoons and a large cake knife.

"Your wish," he exclaimed as he handed the knife to Elena with a flourish. Elena slipped the blade into the moist cake and brought it down slowly, her eyes half closed. They ate cake and drank hot chocolate. She felt betrayed. Such loving attention. But such a gift.

"And now," Jake spoke theatrically as he rose from the table, "now Elena Traxton challenges the LZZ. She battles the machine with her emotions. She defies technology to define her feelings. But can she triumph?"

He walked briskly to the sideboard, bringing the mezzanine to the table and placing it before his wife.

"See her quarrel, see her face tremble as she meets her foe!" His flamboyant delivery and clownishness distressed her, and she wished his malice would manifest itself more directly.

"Give me the headset," Elena said firmly. Jake placed them on her head and she adjusted them quietly.

"Now," he said, "is this woman in love?"

Elena said nothing. He turned the machine on. It took 40 minutes to verify the machine's first reading with subsequent ones. But all were the same. There was no read, no stranger lurking in Jake's absence. But she did not love her husband. He looked dismayed and rose to pack the machine away.

"If you please," Elena rose too. She then placed the headset on her husband.

"It's only fair," she added. Jake sat mechanically. Elena surveyed the instruction manual, and then fiddled with another cord leading from the back of the set, attaching it and a connector to her body.

"I'm ready," she stated.

"What's this for?" he inquired.

"It's the specific love test," Elena replied. "Just to find out if you're in love with me."

He was not, according to the machine. A further love reading indicated he was in love however, and Jake mentally scanned the women of his acquaintance to discover who it might be. He was uneasy but fascinated. He had never even known Jennifer . . . no, not love. Pat . . . could be. Really?

Elena sat back and watched him, convinced she had disclosed the lover that had wanted to deflower her, the one that had, no doubt, been the reason for her own loss of love. She felt jealous and angry and miserable. Every negative emotion that had ever passed through her body gathered with the power of one almighty being and shot from her eyes in a look that no living thing should ever see.

But Jake saw and his innocence became guilt, and he imagined seductions he had never thought possible. And he saw women holding him in their hearts. Women who loved him, women unlike his wife. And he believed himself loved by a stranger he had perhaps seen but once.

So, he was not in love with his wife? Then Elena's anger travelled to her fingers, and they tore the seatbelt from her neck and flung it to the table where it dangled precariously on the edge for a moment before falling to the floor.

It was over.

3.

Within three months they were divorced. Each full of misunderstanding, unable to comprehend the truth. How was one to know their own feelings? Was it perhaps fortunate that the machine had made the truth clear to them?

Elena missed Jake, but wasn't it true that she did not love? Jake could not find the woman he was supposed to love, but believed he would in time. The machine had said he was in love – but not to his wife.

Years passed and they gradually joined the ranks of the outcast and the forgotten.

When a small item appeared in the news readout in 2009, few cared to think about what it meant to their lives. But no one forgot the brief statement: "Error found in LZ2 mechanism."

MATTER OF MIND

By Jai S. Russell

HE walked close to the outside edge of the pavement, edging instinctively away from the summer heat reflected from the high, dusty city blocks. The streets were strangely empty, the usual busy throngs migrated to the coolness of parks or beaches as the sun slowly lost itself behind the enclosing buildings. He walked quietly, with a rubber bounce from the thick soles of his joggers, hands thrust deep in faded jeans, head thrust low, deep in thought.

It had been a good session, a working group the leader had called it. "You're making good progress, Paul," he'd said, and Paul had felt it. Felt the power gathering within himself, the power to be himself, to take control of his body and his thoughts and direct them any way he chose. The courage to face his fear, to own its existence and to still direct his life. For perhaps the first time in his short twenty-three years, he dared to feel hopeful, to feel at peace.

He whistled quietly and tonelessly as he bounced along. So he hadn't understood it all – a strange philosophy, almost a religion, although the leader kept denying this. *Show me your face before you were born*, the thought for the week. Now there was a request to twist a mind into shape. "Don't force it, Paul," he'd been told, "let it happen. Let understanding come in its own good time." And even in this, in the permission to *self*, the promise to *self* to just "let it happen", there was freedom, freedom from striving and from failure, and from the need to understand and explain and categorise. He hadn't had an attack in months now and only one, a mild one, since the earlier hypotherapy sessions.

The firm but light tap tap on his shoulder was an intrusion, an unwanted interruption of his hopeful, fear-free musings. He turned, mildly irritated, expecting to find some stranger at his side seeking the time or a direction; or to see a more welcome, familiar face from the group, a friend who'd hurried quietly to catch up with him.

The ancient torso and head didn't dawn on the young face until he'd spun around twice and met the total emptiness that stretched before him and behind.

He was standing in front of a long store window. No doorways or side streets, or nooks or corners, offering hiding space for his unseen tapper. No ghostly form reflected at his side in the sun-ruddy glass. No demonic, red-lit face leered over his shoulder. Yet, he would have almost welcomed any visible manifestation of the tapper. His left shoulder angled still to the demanding touch. His own arms did to circle his slight shoulders, hugging his trembling; his right hand closing on the spot, wiping, cleaning, as if asserting ownership.

It's begun again, he screamed silently. I can't go through it all again. Oh Christ, it's not fair. These moments without it, no voices, no dialogue directing, pleading, commanding. No black spaces in my head, no black-outs. I can't live with it all again.

Take control, he ordered. *The exercises, the Mavros, breathe slowly, slowly.* He slid gently to the warm pavement, his back safe against the smooth, firm glass of the shop window, legs crossed, hands cupped, eyes still and vacant, seeking within "Ohmm . . . mm," he sighed as he fought to still the racing panic in his veins. "Ohmm . . . mm . . . Mmadmas . . . Ohm." He matched the rhythm of his chant to the thridding of his heart, slowing the beat; gently, compulsively, he moved into a semblance of calm.

Tap tap. He started, but this time there was a lingering grip on his shoulder and a shape: solid, blue-wrapped legs on a level with his eyes. He almost hugged them but rose instead, laughing with relief.

"No, officer, I'm not scared, or plianted. I just stopped for a rest. Meditation, you know, it energises the system. I've just come from a group session, a therapy session. Power of the mind, that stuff, you know?"

He knew he was rambling, talking too fast, trying to ease the officer's suspicions, trying also to hold him there, real and solid and comforting. He wanted to throw his arms around the unfocused figure.

The officer still eyed him warily, shising a touch in his face although it was still not fully dark. "On your way, then," he ordered. "Find a better place next time you decide to energise, or I'll look you for sure."

Paul moved off, down the long emptiness of the street, feeling the comfort of the policeman's eyes on his exposed back.

In the next few days the invisible tapper became bolder, more insistent. The tap tap, always on the same spot, grew harder, more demanding. Once in a market queue, he'd almost looked out, thinking he'd been pushed and expecting to face some impatient, aggressive shopper. The small, dumpy man behind him had visibly cringed from his scowl.

After that, he'd decided to ignore the tapping. No turning around, no checking for hiding places. *Fact I experience inescapable taps and shoves high on my left shoulder. Resolve: no what? Let it happen, let understanding come in its own time, if it will. I will not allow these events to direct or influence my actions.* He felt pleased with himself and his calm control. The voices hadn't returned, nor any of the other stuff. He could, he thought, live with a few taps on the back, even if it was scary and crazy at times. *Give myself a pat on the back, he laughed wryly.*

What took him back to the meditation clinic was the almost constant aching itch that began above his left clavicle. A sharp line of sensation, spread four fingers wide – the exact space of a tapping hand.

"Tender to the touch, Paul?" The question was rhetorical, Paul had flinched at the leader's gentle probing. "Some visible discoloration too. Red – almost like a ship mark. Psychosomatic manifestation perhaps? What do you think, Paul?"

"The taps feel real enough. Almost a push or a punch at times. They're getting harder too and more frequent. I thought I was handling it, controlling it." Paul sounded disappointed. "You're going to tell me it's guilt, self-punishment again, aren't you?"

"Very good, Paul. We're halfway to resolving this if you can recognise

that. A long way from the terrified young man who came here six months ago, convinced that he was schizoid, or possessed, or mad. The voices and the attacks, the possessions if you will, were internal, not at all outside of self. Now this is manifesting as an external event, a tap on the shoulder, a bruising on the skin – the outer surface of Paul.

"Ah! Paul, perhaps you have worked too hard to exclude that darker side of yourself. Perhaps this is the Id, expelled, unrecognised, the unreasoning self denied; not accepted and controlled, and integrated, as it must be. The Yin to the Yang, the dark to the light that together form the basis of man's existence, forever offering him conscious choice.

"Come, Paul, remember the other times. Remember the voice, the dreadful things it spoke of, the things it made you do. The acts you couldn't own. Tell me about them again, Paul. Remember them and forgive – forgive yourself – for you are both the darkness and the light."

Even under the leader's light hypnotic Paul shuddered as memories crowded upon him. He replayed from his childhood the fiery, angry lashing out to hurt, kicking, biting, screaming, but often silently. Even then he'd watched his childish body moving and acting without his conscious control, unable to halt it, trapped within his own shell.

He dodged up the sickening memory of the tiny mutilated kitten, remembering the blood on his hands, hands that hung on the ends of his arms where they'd always been but which he'd watched, helpless to control, while they, dispossessed, cut and tore and beat at the pathetic mewling ball on the bench in front of him. After an endless time the bloody ball of fur had stopped moving, and he'd buried the tiny body, tears scorching his cheeks. And his parents had thought the kitten strayed and found him another to still his tears.

He remembered the many attempts at self-mutilation. The meagre, pleading voice screaming inside his head, directing him, commanding him. "I will make you know Me. I will not live alone in this empty darkness. See! See what I can do. I am real. I will not be denied." And the honor of the blood in his hand, shing, latching at his own left thumb. Pain, and fear and bold, and the sickening inability to stop. He carried the scar of that day still.

His drawn face flashed as he recalled the awakening tinges of his teenage body. The voice, gleeful in his head as he lay naked on his bed, or in front of the mirror. "My name, it's my name. See, you can't feel anything if I don't let you. Watch me. Watch me. WATCH ME!" And he'd watched, silent and paralysed, deprived of sensation, deprived of action, while his body performed without his conscious will.

His mind rushed over the long years of doctors, of psychiatrists – the anxious, angry, hurt faces of his parents. The endless medication and treatment and punishment, and the long, long days and nights of fearful confusion as he became older and aware of his difference, his madness.

He'd come to the meditation clinic in a final act of desperation, after his other self, his dark alter-ego, had raped Sue. The voice had taken his body and turned an act of loving, of sharing, into something cruel and unforgiving. Crying all the time, inside, "Watch me! Look! This is how it's done", and he'd watched, without choice, while his body had raped his girl.

He'd decided then to kill himself, to destroy the body and wish it the other, the evil that shared his space. He'd known then that he was quite mad.

Instead, he'd found the leader and the group and meditation therapy. It had all sounded weird and occult, almost magic, all very different from the clinical treatments he'd been subjected to over the years. Yet, there was a strange logic to it, and he'd been desperate. And it had worked in a way; he'd felt free for the first time in his life.

"How do you feel now, Paul?" The gentle voice brought him back from the horrors of the past. "Do you still feel pain for all that happened?"

Paul considered carefully, "I would still undo it if I could, but no, there's no blame left. It's past. It's different now. Different because I think I can stop it happening again, even if my unconscious is still playing tricks with me."

"And the other, the one who did all these things, can you see now that *he* was yourself, unguarded, afraid of oblivion, afraid of your own denial? You sought to deny and destroy what is a part of yourself, Paul, only a facet of yourself, to be acknowledged and controlled as your conscious sees fit."

"Was that what you meant when you asked, 'show me your face before you were born,' leader? I guess I had two faces and didn't want to see them both?"

"Well, something like that, Paul. Yet, there is more to that request. But let that come of itself. Don't push, Paul."

"If the tapping comes again, accept it, welcome that other self. Forgive yourself, Paul - all of you."

For weeks Paul tried hard to accept and believe in the leader's words. He meditated whenever the growing pain in his shoulder dazed him sleep, chewing over in his mind the elusive phrase "your face before you were born," drowsing it around and around in his consciousness until it echoed as if from the inner voice.

He ate voraciously, midnight snacks that would normally have fed him for a week. Walking the streets, he'd find a half-eaten burger or a chewed chocolate bar in his hand and no conscious memory of having bought them. He guessed his increased appetite was his body seeking extra resources, energy to fight the almost constant ache in his shoulder.

He did not seek out a doctor until his probing right hand felt the hard, gathering nodules through the thin muscle of his collar-bone.

"We must have X-rays and a biopsy. At once." The doctor's tone was stern, accusing. "Why did you not come sooner, when the pains first started?"

"I've been going to meditation therapy," replied Paul. "Thought it was all psychological, you know? All here, in my head."

"Huh? Meditation. Quack medicine, you mean. This will almost certainly require surgery. And swiftly. That growth feels enormous already - in just a few weeks. And quite discrete from the surrounding tissue, quite discrete. Now, medical history?"

This took some time, as the doctor's probing questions were broad but thorough. Parents' health? Cancer in the family? Grandparents? His birth? Any scans, X-rays, stuff like that?

Paul was an expert. He'd been to so many doctors and clinics in his life that he knew his medical profile in depth.

"No, no intra-uterine X-rays. Two scans though, they thought I'd be twins or more." He felt into the same rapid staccato mode as the doctor. "Mother was on fertility drugs before I was conceived. I am an only child. She was thirty-three before she conceived. Induced birth, three weeks overdue almost. Really wasn't ready to be born." He smiled, expecting the doctor to respond, but he didn't.

"Right," the doctor scribbled busily, "admittance to St. Luke's. Expect to be in for a while, tissue samples and tests first. I'll give you something for the pain right now. Yes, I know you're trying to hide it, ignore it, Aspirin won't do this time. Get home, get your things in order, work, friends, parents, what have you. Then get right into hospital. See you there first thing tomorrow."

Paul left, mildly sedated by the capsule the doctor had given him, his shoulder eased for the first time in days, but anxious, panicked by the doctor's urgency.

When he reached his solitary room, he hurriedly began examining the few things he'd need into a hold-all. Then, suddenly exhausted, he sank slowly onto the edge of his bed. The cessation of pain, and the strange relief that the tapping on his shoulder might have a rational explanation rooted in reality, even such a reality as a possible cancer, eased his tortured mind.

He fell across the bed and rolled, already unconscious, onto his back.

As he slept, he dreamed.

He dreamed of a time before he was, a genesis. Deamed and remembered a swimming confusion of genes and chromosomes, of rolling, heaving spindle-shifting, shaping, changing to the accompaniment of the microscopic thunder of splitting, cranking cells. Felt a pre-embryonic oneness, swash in a raging, drenching, catalytic sea of fertility. Unfelt pain was a wrenching, tearing drive to pull apart, to reach for otherness, to divide: A timeless eternity of striving was impetuous on the mindless memory of his basic cellular material, as he'd surged and cycled in a chemical soup of fertility drugs. He'd was a pregnant, unfinished crescendo, a dreamed anticipation of fusion.

He fell slowly, drifting for uncountable aeons, into a gradual gathering of living plasma that altered and multiplied and fused and shaped to the new and so the inherent dictates of its internal, biological blueprint.

- Cells to the south, gather and replicate until this number of days/weeks/hours have elapsed. Check, you are the basis of a thigh. To the west a shorter space of time, a shoulder, an arm -

Yet, always to the busy, changing world of that too fertile womb, an echo ring, a memory of a heart beat silently, a spine coded, a toe twitched. A ghostly half-remembered other thing, that almost, once, had been.

So was formed, deep within the warm darkness, the small being that was to be Paul - and the shimmering, reverberating yearning, that was the other.

Paul listened to the haunting, wordless voice as he had listened all of his life. "Why can I not live? I am here, know me. I have the right. I need to BE. I want ... I need ... I need ... I ... I ... I ..."

And Paul knew the voice at last for a part of himself. Yet not himself. And somewhere in the echoing of the other's need he found knowledge, held sleeping since that almost time of fusion, lying in the very patterning of his genes; they were two in one body. And yet not two, for one had never been, was only a potential.

Paul knew his guilt, his own existence forever denied that other one life. Denied himself life, for the other was closer than brother, more than twin, turned at the point of cloning, of fissioning, turned back upon itself, himself.

Within the dream Paul found a kind of peace, of forgiveness, of absolution. His breathing became regular, his drawn face relaxed, accepting this point in his life as a climax, inescapable from that first fateful joining of sperm and ova. He slept.

For six days and nights he slept, undisturbed and unmoving. And within this sleeping body the biological timepiece, the unique, drag-altered clock within his cells, continued with the patient long since interrupted in the womb. Cells replicated again and again and again.

On the seventh afternoon he woke slowly, weak but rested. He lay still for a moment, aware of a presence beside him. Slowly, he turned his head to the left. A pair of wide, brown eyes gazed back at him, with caution, from a face long familiarly reflected from mirrors and windows.

The head growing from his left shoulder raised up slightly from their shared pillow. "The leader was almost right. I saw my face before I was born," said a remembered voice — his voice. And it laughed, and it was not evil but full of darkness and of light, Yin and Yang.

I STILL CALL AUSTRALIA HOME

By George Turner

The past is another country; they do things differently there (L. P. Hartley)

I.

THEY complemented of *Sagares* had no idea, when they started out, of how long they might be gone. They searched the sky, the three hundred of them, men and women, black and brown and white and yellow, and in thirty years landed on forty planets whose life-support parameters appeared — from distant observation — close to those of Earth.

Max, they discovered, might fit his own terrestrial niche perfectly, but those parameters for his existence were tight and inelastic. There were planets where they could have dwelt in sealed environments, venturing out only in special suits, even one planet where they could have existed comfortably through half its year but been burned and suffocated in the other half. They found not one where they could establish a colony of markland.

In thirty years they achieved nothing but an expectable increase in their numbers and this was a factor in their decision to return home. The ship was becoming crowded and, in the way of crowded tenements, something of a slum.

So they headed for Earth, and at the end of the thirty-first year, took up a processing north-south orbit allowing them a leisurely overview, day by day, of the entire planet.

This was wise. They had spent thirty years in space, travelling between solar systems at relativistic speeds, and reckoned that about six hundred local years had passed since they set out. They did not know what manner of world they might find.

They found, with their instruments, that the greenhouse effect had subsided slowly during the centuries, aided by the first wisps of galactic cloud heralding the new ice age, but that the world was still warmer than the interregal norm. The ozone layer seemed to have healed itself, but the desert areas were still formidably large although the spread of new pasture and forest was heartening.

What they did not see from orbit was the lights of cities by night and this did not greatly surprise them. The world they had left in a desperate search for new habitat had been an ant heap of ungovernable, unsupportable billions whose numbers were destined to shrink drastically if any were to survive at all. The absence of lights suggested that the population problem had solved itself in grim fashion.

They dropped the ship into a lower orbit just outside the atmosphere and brought in the spy cameras.

There were people down there, all kinds of people. The northern hemisphere was home to nomadic tribes, in numbers like migratory nations, the northern temperate zone had become a corn belt, heavily farmed and guarded by

soldiers in dispersed forts, with few towns and many villages, the equatorial jungles were, no doubt, home to hunter-gatherers but their traces were difficult to see; there were signs of urban communities, probably trading centres, around the seacoasts but no evidence of transport networks or lighting by night and no sounds of electronic transmission. Civilization had regressed, not unexpectedly.

They chose to inspect Australia first because it was separated from the larger landmasses and because the cameras showed small farming communities and a few towns. It was decided to send down a Contact Officer to inspect and report back.

The ship could not land. It had been built in space and could live only in space; planetary gravity would have warped its huge but light-bodied structure beyond repair. Exploratory aircraft could have been dispatched, but it was reasoned that a crew of obviously powerful supermen might create an untrusting reserve among the inhabitants, even an unhealthy regard for gods or demons from the sky. A single person, powerfully but unobtrusively armed, would be suitable ambassador.

They sent a woman, Nagan Johnson, not because she happened to be Australian but because she was a Contact Officer, and it was her restored turn for duty.

They chose a point in the south of the continent because it was autumn in the hemisphere, and an average daily temperature of twenty-six C would be bearable, and dropped her by tractor beam on the edge of a banana grove owned by Mrs Flighty Jones, who screamed and fled.

2.

Flighty, in the English of her day, meant something like scatterbrained. Her name was, in fact, Halo-Mary (a rough - very rough - descendant of Ave Maria), but she was a creature of fits and starts, so much so that the men at the bottling shed made some fun of her before they were convinced that she had seen something, and called the Little Mother of the Bottles.

"There was I, crusting banana bunches for squoozing into bumpy pap, when it goes hissa-bump behind me."

"What went hissa-bump?"

"It did."

"What was it?" Little Mother wondered if the question was unfair to Flighty.

"I don't know." Having no words, she took refuge in frustrated tears. She had inherited the orchard but not the self control proper to a proprietary woman. In front of the men! Little Mother sighed and tried again. "What did it look like? What shape?"

Flighty tried hard. "Like a bag. With legs. And a glass bowl on top. And it bounced. That's what made the bump. And it made a noise."

"What sort of noise?"

"Just a noise." She thought of something else. "You know the pictures on the library wall? In the holy stories part? The ones where the angels go up? Well, like the angels."

Little Mother knew that the pictures did not represent angels, whatever the congregation were told. Hiding trepidation, she saw the nearest man for Top Mother.

Top Mother came, and listened - and said, as though visitations were nothing out of the way, "We will examine the thing that hissa and bumps. The men may come with us in case their strength is needed." That provided at least a bodyguard.

The men were indeed a muscular lot, and also a superstitious lot, but they were expected to show courage when the women claimed protection. They picked up whatever knives and mashing clubs lay to hand and tried to look grim. Man-to-man was a bloodwarming event but man-to-wharfist had queasy overtones. They agreed with Little Mother's warning. "There could be danger."

"There might be greater danger later on if we do not investigate. Lead the way, Halo-Mary." A Top Mother did not use nicknames.

Flighty was now thoroughly terrified and no longer sure that she had seen anything, but Top Mother took her arm and pushed her forward. Perhaps it had gone away; perhaps it had bounced up and up.

It had not gone anywhere. It had sat down and pushed back its glass bowl and revealed itself, by its cropped hair, as a man.

"A man," murmured Top Mother, who knew that matriarchy was a historical development and not an evolutionary given. She began to think like the politician which at heart she was. A man from - from outside - could be a social problem.

The men, who were brought up to reverence women but often resented them - except during the free-fathering festivals - gazed and winked at each other and wondered what the old girl would do.

The old girl said, "Lucky! Walk up and observe him."

Lucky started off unwillingly, then noticed that three cows grazed unconcernedly not far from the man in a bag and took heart to cross the patch of pasture at the orchard's edge.

At a long arm's length he stood, leaned forward and sniffed. He was forest bred and able to sort out the man in a bag's scents from the norms about him and, being forest bred, his pheromone sense was better than rudimentary. He came so close that Nagan could have touched him and said, "Just another bloody woman!" The stranger should have been a man, a sex hero!

He called back to Top Mother, "It's only a woman with her hair cut short."

They all crowded forward across the pasture. Females were always peaceable - unless you really scratched their pride.

The hissa Flighty had heard had been the bootjacks operating to break the loose of a too-fast landing by an ineptly handled tractor beam, the bump had been the quality of a contact that wrenched an ankle. Even the bounce was almost real as she hopped for a moment on one leg. The noise was Nagan's voice through a speaker whose last user had left it tuned to harmonic range,

a hearty, "Shit! Goldam shit!" before she sat down and became aware of a dumpy figure vomiting among columns of what she remembered vaguely as banana palms. Not much of a start for good PR.

She thought first to strip the boot and bind her ankle, then that she should not be caught minus a boot if the runway brought unfriendly reinforcements. She did not fear the village primitives, though she carried no identifiable weapons, the thick gloves could spit a variety of deaths through levelled fingers. However, she had never killed a civised organism and had no wish to do so, her business was to prepare a welcome home.

The scents of the air were strange but pleasant, as the orbital analysis had affirmed; she folded the transparent fishbowl back into its neck slot. She became aware of mammals nearby. Cows. She recognised them from pictures though she had been wholly city bred in an era of gigantic cities. They took no notice of her. Fascinated and unafraid, she absorbed a landscape of grass and tiny flowers in the grass, trees and shrubs and a few vaguely familiar crawling and hopping insects. The only real strangeness was the spaciousness stretching infinitely on all sides, a thing that the lush Ecological Decks of *Starfarer* could not mimic, together with the sky like a distant ceiling with wags of cloud. Might it rain on her? She solemnly remembered rain.

Time passed. It was sweetly hot but not as hot as autumn in the greenhouse streets.

They came at last, led by a tall woman in a black dress – rather, a robe cut to enhance dignity though it was trimmed off at the knees. She wore a white headress like something starched and folded in the way of the old nursing tradition and held together by a brooch. She was old, perhaps in her sixties, but she had presence and the dress suggested status.

She clutched another woman by the arm, urging her forward, and Nagan recognised the clothing, like grey denim jeans, that had fled through the palms. Grey Denim Jeans poured and plated herself firmly in a determined no-further pose. Madam In Black gestured to the escort and spoke a few words.

Nagan became aware of the men and made an appreciative sound unbecoming in a middle-aged matron past child-bearing years. These men wore only G-strings and they were men. Not big men but shapely, muscular and very male. *Or am I so accustomed to Starfarer crew that any change rings a festival bell? Nagan, behave!*

The man ordered forward came wisely and stopped a safe arm's length from her, snuffing Nagan examined him. *If I were, even looked, twenty years younger . . .* He spoke suddenly in a resentful, blaming tone. The words were strange (of course they must be) yet hauntingly familiar, she thought that part of the sentence was "dam-dam she!"

She kept quiet. Best to observe and wait. The whole party, led by Madam In Black, came across the pasture. They stopped in front of her, fanning out in silent inspection. The men sniffed mildly of sweat, but that was almost a pleasure; after thirty years of propinquity, *Starfarer's* living quarters stank of sweat.

Madam In Black said something in a voice of authority that seemed part

of her. It sounded a little like "Go're yah?" – interrogative with a clipped note to it, the old front-of-the-mouth Australian vowels had vanished in the gulf of years. It should mean, by association, *Who are you? but in this age might be a generalised, Where are you from? even, What are you doing here?*

Nagan played the oldest game in language lesson, tipping her chest and saying, "Nagan. I – Nagan."

Madam In Black nodded and tipped her own breast. "Ay Tap-Ma."

"Tupna?"

"Dr – Tap-Ma, Yah Naggona?"

"Nagan."

The woman repeated, "Nagan," with a fair approximation of the old vowels and followed with, "Wumtyn ata?"

Nagan made a guess at vowel drift and consonant elision and came up with, *Where are you out of? meaning, Where do you come from?*

They must know, she thought, that something new is in the sky. A ship a kilometre long has been circling for weeks with the sun glinting on it at dawn and twilight. They can't have lost all contact with the past; there must be stores of the bare bones of history . . .

She pointed upwards and said, "From the starship."

The woman nodded as if the statement made perfect sense and said, "Stair-boat."

Nagan found herself fighting sudden tears. *Home, home, HOME has not forgotten us.* Until this moment she had not known what Earth meant to her, swimming in the depths of her shipbound mind. "Yes, stairboat. We say stairship."

The woman repeated, hesitantly, "Stairhoop?" She tried again, reaching for the accent, "Stairship! I say it right?"

"Yes, you say it right."

The woman repeated, "Properly. To for that. It is old-speak. I read some of that but not speak – only small bit."

So not everything had been lost. There were those who had rescued and preserved the past. Nagan said, "You are quite good."

Tap-Ma blushed with obvious pleasure. "Now we go." She waved towards the banana grove.

"I can't." A demonstration was needed. Nagan struggled upright, put the injured foot to the ground and tried for a convancing lamp. That proved easy; the pain made her gasp and she sat down hard.

"Ah! You bump?"

"Indeed I bump." She unstacked the right boot and broke the seals before fascinated eyes and withdrew a swelling foot.

"We carry."

We meant two husky males with wrists clasped under her, carrying her through the grove to a large wooden shed where more near-tailed men worked at vats and tables. They sat her on a table and brought cold water (*How do they cool it? Ice? Doubtful!*) and a thick yellow grease which quite miraculously eased the pain somewhat (*A native pharmacopoeia?*) and stout, unbleached bandages to swathe her foot tightly.

She saw that in other parts of the shed the human flesh was being mashed into long wooden boards. Then it was fed into glass cylinders whose ends were capped, again with glass, after a pinch of some noxious-looking fungus was added. (*Preservative? Spoilage? Why not?*) A preserving industry, featuring glass rather than metal, such details helped to place the culture.

Tap-Ma called, "Lukcy!" and the man came forward to be given a long instruction in which the word *Saturoot* figured often. He nodded and left the shed at a trot.

"Lukcy go - goes - to sell Library. We carry you there."

"Who is Library?"

The woman thought and finally produced, "Skiffler. Old word, I think."

"Scholar? Books? Learning?"

"Yes, yes, books. Scholar. Ta." Ta? Of course - thank you. Fancy the child's word persisting.

"You will eat, please?"

Nagan said quickly, "No, thank you. I have this." She dug out a concentrate pack and swallowed one tablet before the incomprehending Tap-Ma. She dared not risk local food before acting up the test ER, enzymes and once-harmless proteins could change on march. They brought a liner padded like a mattress and laid her on it. Four pleasantly husky men carried it smoothly, waist-high, swinging gently along a broad path towards low hills, one of which was crowned by a surprisingly large building from which smoke plumes issued.

"Tap-Ma goodbyes you."

"Goodbye, Tap-Ma. And ta."

3.

It was a stone building, even larger than it had seemed. But that was no real wonder; the medieval stone masons had built cathedrals far more ornate than this squared-off warehouse of a building. It was weathered drab grey but was probably yellow sandstone, of which there had been quarries in Victoria. Sandstone is easily cut and shaped even with soft iron tools.

There were windows, but the glass seemed not to be of high quality, and a small doorway before which the bearers set down the litter. A thin man of indeterminate middle age stood there, brown eyes examining her from a dark, clean shaven face. He wore a loose shirt, wide-cut, ballooning shorts and sandals, and he smiled brilliantly at her. He was a full-blooded Aborigine.

He said, "Welcome to the Library, *Sarwuman*," with unexceptionable pronunciation though the accent was of the present century.

She sat up. "The language still lives."

He shook his head. "It is a dead language but scholars speak it, as many of yours spoke Latin. Or did that predate your time? There are many uncertainties."

"Yes, Latin was dead. My name is Nagan."

"I am Library."

"Library?"

"If you would be pedantic, but the people call me Library. It is both name and title. I preside." His choice of words, hovering between old-fashioned and donnish, made her feel like a child before a tutor, yet he seemed affable.

He gave an order in the modern idiom and the bearers carried her inside. She gathered an impression of stone walls a metre thick, pierced by square doors which formed a temperature lock. The most heat outside was balanced by an equally hot but dry atmosphere inside. She made the connection at once, having a student's reverence for books. The smoke she had seen was given off by a low temperature furnace stoked to keep the interior air dry and at a reasonably even temperature. This was more than a scholars' library, it was the past, preserved by those who knew its value.

She was carried past open doorways, catching glimpses of bound volumes behind glass, of a room full of hanging maps and once of a white man at a lectern, touching his book with gloved hands.

She was set down on a couch in a rather bare room furnished mainly by a desk of brilliantly polished wood which carried several jars of coloured inks, pens which she thought had split ribs and a pile of thick, greyish paper. (*Unbleached paper? Pollution-free? A psychic prohibition from old trees?*)

The light came through windows, but there were no lamps available with shining parabolic reflectors. And smoke marks on the ceiling. Electricity slept still.

The carriers filed out. Library sat himself behind the desk. "We have much to say to each other."

Nagan marvelled, "You speak so easily. Do you use the old English all the time?"

"There are several hundred scholars in Library. Most speak the old tongue. We practise continually."

"In order to read the old books?"

"That, yes." He smiled in a fashion rankly conspiratorial. "Also it allows private discussion in the presence of the unannounced."

Politics, no doubt - the eternal game that has never slept in all of history. "In front of Tap-Ma, perhaps?"

"A few technical expressions serve to thwart her understanding. But the Tap-Ma is no woman's fool."

"The Tap-Ma? I thought it was her name."

"Her title. Literally, Top Mother. As you would have expressed it, Mother Superior."

"A nun!"

Library shrugged. "She has no cloister and the world is her convent. Call her priest rather than nun."

"She has authority?"

"She has great authority." He looked suddenly quizzical. "She is very wise. She sent you to me before you should fall into error."

"Error? You mean, like sin?"

"That also, but I speak of social error. It would be easy. You are a dry of free thinking and irresponsible doing in a world that could not learn discipline

for living. This Australian world is a religious matriarchy. It is fragile when ideas can shatter and dangers when the women make hard decisions."

It sounded like too many dangers to evaluate at once. Patriarchy and equality she could deal with - in theory - but matriarchy was an unknown quantity in history. He had given his warning and waited silently on her response.

She pretended judiciousness. "That is interesting." He waited, smiling faintly. She said, to gain time, "I would like to remove this travel suit. It is hot."

He nodded, stood, turned away.

"Oh, I'm fully dressed under it. You may watch."

He turned back to her and she pressed the release. The suit split at the seams and crumpled round her feet. She stepped out, removed the gloves with their concealed ornament and revealed herself in close-cut shirt and trousers and soft slippers. The damaged ankle hurt less than she had feared.

Library was impressed but not amazed. "One must expect ingenious invention." He felt the crumpled suit fabric. "Fragile."

She took a small knife from her breast pocket and slit the material, which closed up seamlessly behind the blade. Library said, "Beyond our capability."

"We could demonstrate..."

"No doubt." His interruption was abrupt, unwell. "There is little we need."

He changed direction. "I think Nagas is of Koori derivation."

"Possibly from Noongoon or Nungar or some such. You might know better than I."

His dark face flashed a smile. "I don't soak up old tribal knowledge; while the tribes themselves preserve it in their enclaves."

"Enclaves?"

"We value variety of culture." He hesitated, then added, "Under the matriarchal sign which covers all."

"All the world?"

"Most of it."

That raised questions. "You communicate with the whole world?" From space we detected no radio, no electronic signals at all.

"Warm on poles and radiating towers, as at the books? Their time has not come yet."

A queer way of phrasing it. "But you hinted at global communication, even global culture."

"The means are simple. Long ago the world was drawn together by trading vessels, so it is today. Ours are very fast, we use catamaran designs of great efficiency, copied from your books. The past does not offer much but there are simple things we take - things we can make and handle by simple means." He indicated the suit. "A self-healing cloth would require art beyond our talent."

"We could show..." But could they? Quantum chemistry was involved and electro-molecular physics and power generation... Simple products were not at all simple.

Library said, "We would not understand your showing. Among your millions of books, few are of use. Most are unintelligible because the day of simple

explanation was already past in your era. We strain to comprehend what you would find plain texts, and we fail. Chemistry, physics - those disciplines of complex nomenclature and incomprehensible signs and arbitrary terms - are beyond our understanding."

She began to realize that unstrapped piles of precious but mysterious books are not knowledge.

He said, suddenly harsh, "Understanding will come at its own amenable pace. You can offer us nothing."

"Surely..."

"Nothing! You destroyed a world because you could not control your greed for a thing you called progress but which was no more than a snapping lip of all that came to hand or to mind. You destroyed yourselves by inability to control your breeding. You did not even cry *Hold!* for a decade or a century to unravel the noose of a self-strangling culture. You have nothing to teach. You know little that mattered when sheer existence was at stake."

Nagas sat still, controlling anger. *You don't know how we fought to stem the tides of population and consumption and pollution, how each success brought with it a welter of unforeseen dangers, how impossible it was to co-ordinate a world driven by colour, autonomy, political creed, religious belief and economic stress.*

Because she had been trained to consult intelligence rather than emotion, she stopped thought in mid-flight. *Oh, you are right. These were the impossible troubles brought by greed and irresponsible use of a finite world. We begged our own downfall. Yet...*

"I think," she said, "you speak with the assistance of a lucky survival. You exist only because we did. Tell me how your virtue saved mankind."

Library bowed his head slightly in apology. "I regret anger and implied contempt." His eyes met hers again. "But I will not pretend humility. We rebuilt the race. In which year did you leave Earth?"

"In twenty-one eighty-six. Why?"

"In the last decades before the crumbling. How to express it succinctly? Your world was administered by power groups behind national boundaries, few ruling many, pretending to a mystery termed democracy but ruling by decree. Do I read the history rightly?"

"Yes." It was a hard admission. "Well, it was beginning to seem so. Oppression sprang from the need to ration food. We fed fifteen billions only by working land and sea until natural fertility cycles were exhausted, and that only at the cost of eliminating other forms of life. We were afraid when the assets began to disappear..."

"Rightly. Worst insects, nothing flourishes."

"There was also the need to restrict birth, to deny birth to most of the world. When you take away the right to family from those who have nothing else and punish savagely contravention of the population laws..." She shrugged helplessly.

"You remove the ties that bind, the sense of community, the need to

consider any but the self. Only brute force remains."

"Yes."

"And fails as it has always failed."

"Yes. What happened after we left?"

Libary said slowly, "At first, nota. Populations rose against despots, or perhaps against those forced by circumstances into despotism. But ignorant masses cannot control a state, bureaucracies collapsed, supply fell into anarchy and starvation set in. Pack leaders — not to be called soldiers — fought for arable territory. Then great fools unleashed biological weaponry — I think that meant toxins and bacteria and viruses, whatever such things may have been — and devastated nations with plague and pestilence. There was a time in the northern hemisphere called by a term I read only as Heart of Winter. Has that meaning for you?"

"A time of darkness and cold and starvation?"

"Yes."

"Nuclear winter. They must have stopped the bombing in the nick of time. It could only have been tried by a madman intent on riling the ruins."

"We do not know his name — three names — even which country. Few records were kept after that time. No machines, perhaps, and no paper."

"And then?"

"Who knows? Cultural darkness covers two centuries. Then history begins again; knowledge is reborn. Some of your great cities saw the darkness falling and sealed their libraries and museums in hermetic vaults. This building houses the contents of the Central Library of Melbourne, there are others in the world and many yet to be discovered. Knowledge awaits deciphering but there is no hurry. This is, by and large, a happy world."

Sophisticated knowledge was meaningless here. They could not, for instance, create electronic communication until they had a broad base of metallurgy, electrical theory and a suitable mathematics. Text books might as well have been written in cipher.

"And," Libary said, "there were the Ambulant Scholars. They set up farming communities for self support, even in the Dark Age, while they preserved the teachings and even some of the books of their ancestors. They visited each other and established networks around the world. When they set up schools, the new age began."

"Like monks of the earlier Dark Age, fifteen hundred years before?"

"So? It has happened before?"

"At least once and with less reason. Tell me about the rise of women to power."

Libary chuckled. "Power? Call it that but it is mostly manipulation. The men don't mind being ruled; they get their own way in most things and women know how to bow with dignity when caught in political error. It is a system of giving and taking wherein women give the decisions and take the blame for their mistakes. The men give them children — under certain rules — and take responsibility for teaching them when maternal rearing is completed."

She made a stab in the dark. "Women established their position by taking control of the birth rate."

"Slowly thought, nearly right. They have a mumbo-jumbo of herbs and religious observances and fertility periods but in fact it is all contraception, abortion and calculation. Some men believe, some are sceptical, but it results in attractive sexual rituals and occasional carnivals of lust, so nobody minds greatly." He added offendedly, "Those who cannot restrain their physicality are killed by the women."

That will give Starfarer pause for thought.

"I think," said Libary, "that the idea was conceived by the Ambulant Scholars and preached in religious guise — always a proper approach to basically simple souls who need a creed to cling to. So, you see, the lesson of over-population has been learned and put to work."

"This applies across the planet?"

"Not yet, but it will. America is as yet an isolated continent. Our Ambulant Scholars waddled in the end a great deal of respected authority."

"And now call yourselves Libarians?"

His black face split with pleasure. "It is so good to speak with a quick mind."

"Yet a day will come when population will grow again beyond proper maintenance."

"We propose that it shall not. Your machines and factories will arrive in their own good time, but our present interest is in two subjects you never applied usefully to living: psychology and philosophy. Your thinking men and women studied profoundly and made their thoughts public, but who listened? There is a mountain of the works of those thinkers to be sifted and winnowed and applied. Psychology is knowledge of the turbulent self, philosophy is knowledge of the ideals of which that self is capable. Weave these together and there appears a garment of easy discipline wherein the self is fulfilled and the world becomes its temple, not just a heap of values for mashing. We will solve the problem of population."

Nugan felt, with the uneasiness of someone less than well prepared, that they would. Their progress would be in directions yet unthought of.

"Now," Libary said, "would you please tell me how you came to Earth without a transposing craft?"

"I was dropped by tractor beam."

"A — beam?" She had surprised him at last. "A ray of light that carries a burden?"

"Not light. Monopoles."

"What are those?"

"Do you have magnets? Imagine a magnet with only one end, so that the attraction goes on in a straight line. It is very powerful. Please don't ask how it works because I don't know. It is not in my field."

Libary said modestly, "I would not wish to know. Tell me, rather, what you want here."

"What? Warnings rang in Nugan's head but she could only plough ahead. After six hundred years we have come home! And Earth is far more beautiful than we remember it to be."

His dark eyebrows rose. "Remember? Are you six hundred years old?"

Explanation would be impossible. She said, despairingly, "Time in heaven is slower than time on Earth. Our thirty years among the stars are six centuries of your time. Please don't ask for explanation. It is not magic, it just is so."

"Magic is unnecessary in a sufficiently wonderful universe. Do you tell me that you do not understand the working of your everyday tools?"

"I don't understand the handiwork part. Knowledge is divided among specialists, nobody knows all of even common things."

Libby considered in silence, then sighed lightly and said, "Leave that and return to the statement that you have come home. This is not your home."

"Not the home we left. It has changed."

"Your home has gone away. For ever."

The finality in his tone must have scattered her wits, she thought later; it roused all the homesickness she had held in check and she said quickly, too quickly, "We can rebuild it."

The black face became still, blank. She would have given years of life to recall the stupid words. He said at last, "After all I have told you of resistance to rapid change you propose to redesign our world?"

She dared without thinking, "No! You misunderstand me!" In her mind she pictured herself facing Starfarer's officers, standing out an explanation, seeing disbelief that a trained Contact could be such a yammering fool.

"Do it! Can you mean that your people wish to live as members of our society, in conditions they will see as philosophically astounding and physically primitive?"

He knew she could not mean any such thing. She tried, rapidly, "A small piece of land, isolated, perhaps an island, a place where we could live on our own terms. Without contact. You would remain — unspoiled."

Insulating, condescending habit of speech, truthful in its meaning, revealing and irrevocable!

"You will live sequestered? Without traveling for curiosity's sake, without plundering resources for your machines, without prying into our world and arguing with it? In that case, why not stay between the stars?"

Only truth remained. "We left Earth to found new colonies. Old Earth seemed beyond rescue, only new Earths could perpetuate a subsisting race."

"So much we know. The books tell it."

Still she tried. "We found no new Earth. We searched light years of sky for planets suitable for humans. We found the sky full of planets similar to Earth — but only similar. Man's range of habitable conditions is very narrow. We found planets a few degrees too hot for healthy existence or a few degrees too cool to support a terrestrial ecology, others too seminally young or too acidly old, too deficient in oxygen or too explosively rich in hydrogen, too low in carbon dioxide to support a viable plant life or unbearably foul with methane or lacking an ozone layer. Parent stars, even of G-type, flooded surfaces with overloads of ultra-violet radiation, even gamma radiation, or fluctuated in minute but lethal instabilities. We visited forty worlds in thirty years and found not one where we could live. Now you tell me we are not welcome in our own home!"

"I have told you it is not your home. You come to us out of violence and decay, you are conditioned against serenity. You would be only an eruptive force in a world seeking a middle way. You would doubt our beliefs, corrupt our young men by offering toys they do not need, tempt the foolish to extend domination over space and time — and in a few years destroy what has taken six centuries to build."

Anger she could have borne but he was reasonable — as a stone wall is reasonable and unbreachable.

"Search!" he said. "Somewhere in such intensity must be what you seek. You were sent out with a mission to propagate mankind, but in thirty years you betray it."

She burst out, "Can't you understand that we remember Earth! After thirty years in a steel box we want to come home."

"I do understand. You accepted the steel box, now you refuse the commitment."

She pleaded, "Surely six hundred people are not too many to harbour? There must be small corners —"

He interrupted, "There are small corners innumerable but not for you. Six hundred, you say, but you forget the books with their descriptions of the starships. You forget that we know of the millions of ova carried in the boxes called cryogenic vaults, of how in a generation you would be an army surging out of its small cozier to dominate the culture whose careful virtues mean nothing to you. Go back to your ship, Nugan. Tell your people that time has rolled over them, that their home has vanished."

She sat between dejection and indignation while he surmised the bearings. Slowly she resumed the travel suit.

From the hilltop she saw a world unrolled around her, stirring memory and calling the heart. It should not be lost for a pedantic Aboriginal's obstinacy.

"I will talk with your women!"

"They may be less restrained than I, Nugan. The Top Ma's message said you were to be instructed and sent away. My duty is done."

She surrendered to wickedness. "We'll come as spies of you!"

"Then we will wipe you out as a leprous infection."

She laughed, pointed a gloved finger and a patch of ground glowed red, then white. "Wipe us out?"

He told her, "That will not fight the forces of nature we can unleash against you. Set your colony on a hill and we will surround it with bushfires, a weapon your armory is not equipped to counter. Set it in a valley and we will show you how a flash flood can be created. Force us at your peril!"

All her Contact training vanished in the need to assert. "You have not seen the last of us."

He said equably, "I fear that is true. I fear for you, Nugan, and all of yours."

She toggled the switch at mouth level and the helmet sprang up and over her head, its creases smoothing invariably out. She had a moment's respite at the thought of the Report Committee on *Seafarer*, then she toggled the microphone switch. "Jack!"

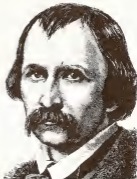
"Here, love. So soon?"

"Yes, so damned soon!" She looked once at the steady figure of Liberty, watching and impassive, then gave the standard call for return. "Lift me home, Jack."

Hurting into the lonely sky, she realised what she had said and began silently to weep.

THE SCIENCE FICTION HALL OF FAME

OTTO GREENBACH



OTTO GREENBACH was an eccentric recluse living in upstate Oregon until famous SF editor, John W. Heinz, stumbled on him while on a scenic writing expedition in 1953. After convincing the wild-eyed Greenbach to put the pen down, Heinz somehow communicated with the hermit long enough to determine that Greenbach was a SF writer of some promise. Being a crazy businessman, Heinz managed to strike a deal on the spot, where he would publish Greenbach's stories in return for Greenbach not shooting him. There began a long and threat-filled relationship between the urbane but crazy Heinz and the monomaniacal Greenbach.

Because Greenbach had been out of touch with society for so long, his stories were individual to say the least. If he had been born a hundred years earlier, he would have been lauded as a prophet. As it was, he churned out story after clammy story, the sole feature of each being a device which had already been invented. Thus: "Distance Pictures" (1953 - a crude approximation of TV), "The Sound from the Air" (1954 - Radio), "Wired" (1954 - Main Electricity) and "The Harmless Killer Drug" (1955 - Penicillin).

In 1936 Heinz attempted to cease publishing Greenbach's efforts in the face of derision from the public, but, after finding a moose head in his bed, reconsidered, and soon the works of the seer continued. "The Reds Overhead" predicted Russian spy satellites a year after Sputnik, and "The Big Cold", a SF murder mystery, foreshadowed the novel idea of a steam driven refrigerator in every household replacing the icobox.

Heinz ceased receiving contributions from Greenbach in 1962 and assumed that he had been devoured by wolves. However, Greenbach's name soon appeared appended to a bizarre Astrology column in *The New Yorker*, strangely just after the editor of *The New Yorker* had been holidaying north of Seattle.

Otto Greenbach - a loss to Science Fiction.

THE AUTHORS

TERRY DOWLING'S stories have appeared in *Omega*, *Apollon*, *Australian Short Stories*, *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* (USA), and in the anthologies *Urban Fantasies* and *Monika at the Speed of Light*. He is the only writer to have won seven Ditmar Awards for fiction. He was senior editor of *The Essential Ellison* and is fantasy/science fiction reviewer for *The Australian*. His first book, *Ryosoteros* (Aphelion Publications), concerns the adventures of a sand-ship captain in a future Australia.

SUE ISLE is twenty-six years old and lives in Perth. Her first story was published in 1981 in *Laughing Cry* (FAW). Three other stories are due to appear sometime this year. These include Marion Zammer Bradley's *Sword and Sorceries 7, SF and Beyond* (USA) and *Glass Reptile Breakout* by the University of W.A. In order to keep eating, she works as an office temp. She is also working on *The Novel*.

GEOFFREY MALONEY is thirty-four years old and began writing science fiction while doing his science degree at Sydney University in the mid-seventies. His short story, "Night Sea with Krell", appeared in Robert Lunford's *New Eyes* late last year; "Hotel Terrinas" appeared in Peter McNamara's *Thyone* fiction supplement earlier this year. He has completed a novel, *Mentis*, as yet unpublished and is currently working on a second novel, *Dhawe*.

MICHAEL PRYOR was born in 1957 in Swan Hill, Victoria, while helping authorities with their inquiries. Much of his early life is shrouded in mystery and Ben Browne photographs. It is rumored that he is still living and working on a self-help book, *Be Your Own Doctor*.

JAI S. RUSSELL has been writing science fiction for the past seven years. She has had stories published in *Omega*, *Apollon*, *Thyone* and *The Adelaide Advertiser*. She is currently working on a science-fantasy novel with the assistance of a grant from the South Australian Department of the Arts.

DIANNE M. SPETER spent eighteen months studying film, painting and sound at Sydney College of the Arts before completing a B.A. (Hons) Degree at Sydney University majoring in English Literature. She has had one science fiction story published in the Queensland based fantasy games magazine *The Wizard's Grimoire*.

DAVID TANSEY was born in Sydney in 1961. He spent three years working as a tax investigator in Papua New Guinea and now lives in Canberra. He is the founder and President of the *Eosteric Order of Dagon*, an H.P. Lovecraft appreciation society. He is also the founder of *The Star Chamber*, a Canberra SF writers' workshop group. He has had over thirty stories published in various Australian fanzines. He won both the first and third prize in the 1989 Canberra SF Society short story competition " . . . And They Shall Wander All Their Days" is his first professionally published story.

GEORGE TURNER was born and educated in Melbourne although he spent part of his childhood in Kalgoorlie, Western Australia. In WWII he served as an infantryman in the Middle East, North Africa and New Guinea. He is one of Australia's leading novelists. His mainstream novels include *The Cap-beard Under the Stars* which was the joint winner of the 1962 Miles Franklin Award. His science fiction novels, *Beloved Son* and *Yesterday's Men*, both won Ditmar Awards, and his most acclaimed novel to date, *The Sea and Summer*, won the Arthur C. Clarke Award. *A Parade of Monsters* (Aphelion Publications) is the first collection of his shorter work.

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AND THE FIRST INSTALMENT OF
THE SCIENCE FICTION HALL OF FAME

